SURVIVING SURVIVAL: THE LIFE & DEATH OF THE KOSINSKIAN MAN

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ABSTRACT

SURVIVING SURVIVAL: THE LIFE & DEATH OF THE KOSINSKIAN MAN

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Jerzy Kosinski (1933-1991) was a Polish-American Holocaust survivor who wrote a number of critically acclaimed novels between 1965 and 1988. His first, *The Painted Bird* (1965), was significant in helping to bring survivor literature into the public consciousness. Since its initial publication, the book has never been out of print and has subsequently been translated into over thirty languages.

The discussion which follows examines seven of Kosinski's nine works of fiction and focuses on the significance of the Kosinskian protagonist. These distinctive male characters evolve from novel to novel, but they all have one thing in common: their survival experience, as young children, defines them for the rest of their lives (as well as throughout the rest of Kosinski's texts). The severity of their wounds affects the way that they see and experience the world, and impairs their ability to relate to others.

This work proposes that all the protagonists together make up what amounts to a life cycle. From his appearance in *The Painted Bird* to his demise in *The Hermit of 69th Street: The Working Papers of Norbert Kosky*, the young boy survivor remains the focal point of Kosinski's work, as he moves from adolescence to manhood and struggles to reenter society. Regardless of where they venture, Kosinski's protagonists cannot escape their earliest childhood memories. They are never truly at peace. For these characters, the Holocaust continues on, within them. Only their deaths, it seems, will discontinue their ongoing agony.

RÉSUMÉ

LA SURVIE DU SURVIVANT: VIE ET MORT DE L'HOMME KOSINSKIEN

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Américain d'origine polonaise et survivant de l'Holocauste, Jerzy Kosinski (1933-1991) fit paraître de 1965 à 1988 plusieurs romans acclamés par la critique. Son premier roman, *The Painted Bird* (1965), traduit en français sous le titre *l'Oiseau bariolé*, a contribué de façon significative à porter la littérature de survivance à la conscience du public. Depuis lors, ce livre a connu d'incessantes réimpressions et a été traduit en plus de trente langues.

Dans les pages qui suivent, nous examinerons sept des neuf oeuvres de fiction écrites par Kosinski. Notre objectif principal sera de saisir la signification du héros kosinskien. Car si au fil des romans, les personnages masculins particuliers évoluent, tous partagent cependant une caractéristique commune: ils ont tous vécu dans leur tendre enfance une expérience de survie qui les marquera pour le reste de leur vie (expérience qui traverse aussi les textes kosinskiens). La sévérité des blessures subies va affecter leur façon de voir et d'expérimenter le monde, et troubler leur capacité de relation aux autres.

Tous ensemble, les personnages kosinskiens déroulent un cycle de vie: tel est le fil conducteur que nous proposons dans ce travail. Depuis son entrée en scène dans *l'Oiseau bariolé* jusqu'à sa mort dans *l'Ermite de la 69ième rue*, le jeune garçon survivant est au coeur de l'oeuvre de Kosinski; nous le suivons dans son passage de l'adolescence à l'âge adulte et dans ses efforts pour réintégrer la société. Partout où ils s'aventurent, les héros de Kosinski ne peuvent échapper à leurs premiers souvenirs d'enfance. Ils ne sont jamais tout à fait en paix. Pour eux, l'Holocauste existe encore et se poursuit en eux. Seule la mort, semble-t-il, pourra mettre un terme à leur agonie.

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PREFACE

Jerzy Kosinski was born in 1933 in Lódz, Poland. As a Jewish child in hiding, he lived for a number of years in the Polish countryside. After the war, Kosinski spent his adolescence and young adulthood in Poland before leaving for the United States in 1957 to attend graduate school. Having first published two well-received books of nonfiction between 1960 and 1962—about collectivist behaviour in Eastern Europe, under the pen name Joseph Novak—Kosinski decided to try his hand at fiction. His childhood recollections of life during the war became the basis of his celebrated novel *The Painted Bird* (1965). Exactly how much of that book is based around Kosinski's personal experiences is still a matter of debate. It is important to note that at the time of its publication, *The Painted Bird* was among the first significant works of Holocaust fiction. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Elie Wiesel described *The Painted Bird* in glowing terms:

> Written with deep sincerity and sensitivity, this poignant first-person account transcends confession and attains in parts the haunting quality and the tone of a quasi-surrealistic tale. (Wiesel 1965, 5)

Kosinski's willingness to write such a book helped bring survivor literature into the mainstream of American publishing. Prior to the early 1960s, Holocaust texts were considered marginal, at least in terms of their commercial viability. The tremendous success of *The Painted Bird* helped change the notion that readers were not interested in learning about the Holocaust. In the short term at least, *The Painted Bird* had a greater impact than almost any other text published on this topic. Even Kosinski himself, by his own admission, had not "foreseen that the novel would take on a life of its own." (PB Afterward, 270) Along with others such as Raul Hilberg, Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, Kosinski brought the matter of the Holocaust to public attention. After the publication of

books such as *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961), *Night* (1958), *Survival in Auschwitz* (1958) and *The Painted Bird*, there was a growing realization that the murder of six million Jews was a seminal event in history, not simply a footnote to World War II.

Emboldened by the critical success of his first novel, Kosinski embarked on a career as a novelist, publishing eight other books, including *Steps* (1968), which won the 1969 National Book Award and *Being There* (1971), which became a successful Hollywood movie starring Peter Sellers. During the 1970's, partially on account of his frequent appearances on network television talk shows, Kosinski became one of America's best-known novelists. He also developed a peculiar habit of enhancing and distorting his personal biography. This was to become important later. In 1982, Kosinski found himself at the centre of a literary scandal which was sparked off by an article in the *Village Voice*. There were two basic accusations: 1) that Kosinski employed an unusual amount of editorial assistance in the production of his novels and 2) that much of what he had told others about himself was false. The scandal profoundly influenced the composition of his final book, *The Hermit of 69th Street: The Working Papers of Norbert Kosky* (1988). In May 1991, Kosinski committed suicide in his Manhattan apartment.

*

Starting with *The Painted Bird*, the remainder of this work examines a number of Jerzy Kosinski's best-known books. Kosinski's protagonists, the lonely, frequently angry men who populate his work, grow and change over time, but they all share certain basic characteristics. They are haunted by their survival experience long after departing Eastern Europe. The traumas they sustain in childhood—living in constant terror—leave these characters emotionally deformed. In his novels after *The Painted Bird*, the Holocaust remains as an after-image, haunting the protagonists. Determined never again to become

victims, the Kosinskian men in each novel struggle to find ways of reentering society, with varying degrees of success. Taken together, Kosinski's protagonists constitute a life cycle, which charts what becomes of the survivor in the immediate aftermath of the war and throughout the rest of his days.

This analysis of Kosinski's oeuvre occupies five chapters. Each one examines a different book and/or aspect of Kosinski's work. The first chapter attempts to fit Kosinski's work into a wider intellectual context. It begins with a brief biographical account of Kosinski's life. The events and characters about whom he was inclined to write were so heavily influenced by his life in Eastern Europe, both during and after the war, that there will be a discussion of Kosinski's take on the Total State—with attention on his idea that the collectivity is an inherent threat to the individual. Next, there is a discussion of the Kosinskian man, a term vital to the functioning of this dissertation. This conflicted character, mistreated as a child and struggling, as an adult, to reintegrate into society, recurs throughout Kosinski's fiction. He is typically a crafty individualist, inured by the suffering he endured as a child. The Kosinskian man is present in seven of the nine works of fiction or 'autofiction'[1] that Kosinski wrote—inclusive of *The Painted Bird*—where this character is first seen. Lastly, there will be a brief discussion of Kosinski's most important intellectual influences and their impact on his fiction, as well as a literature review, focusing on the articles and books that most influenced the composition of this work.

Chapter Two traces the genesis of the Kosinskian man, as he arises in *The Painted Bird* and grows to manhood in *Steps*. By tracing this protagonist's evolution—from victim to victimizer—*The Painted Bird* will be employed as a guide to *Steps*. In *The Painted Bird*,

[1] Autofiction, which will be discussed at length in Chapter Four and Five, is a term used by Kosinski to denote work that straddles the line between autobiography and fiction.

because he is so different in both appearance and spirit, the peasants take pleasure in tormenting and humiliating the nameless boy. He is treated as an alien creature—the ultimate outsider. The boy, in turn, tries in vain to understand the source of the peasant's animus. Superstition, religion and politics each fail to provide any satisfactory answers. When he is finally reunited with his parents, after the war, it is too late. He no longer recognizes them and feels only resentment for their abandonment of him. Here the issue of control becomes of paramount importance. By the end of the novel, he has been transformed into a cynical and sometimes violent adolescent, convinced that others will always be out to hurt him. He envies all those who wield power over life and death—and dreams of being more like them. In *Steps*, a new type of protagonist emerges: a man with a mania for control. Determined to always be more ruthless than his enemies, this protagonist is the first fully-grown Kosinskian man. He moves through life aware of what it means to be a victim, mindful of the cruelty of which others are capable. To him, all that matters is staying in control. He lives for himself and does not much care what happens to anyone else. Emotionally detached from the world around him, he spends his life attempting to gain the upper hand in each interaction.

The third chapter deals with *Cockpit* (1975). Tarden, the preeminent Kosinskian protagonist, is a ruthless, itinerant secret agent whose only satisfaction comes from manipulating those around him. Detached from his emotions, he lives out his life in disguise, prepared to adopt a new identity at a moment's notice. Tarden's need to stay in control is his defining feature, yet he frequently fails to achieve this goal. There is a pointlessness and immaturity inherent in Tarden's quest for control. He wants to reengage with other people, but he cannot bring himself to do so: it would require trust and he possesses none. Tarden only feels secure when he is by himself, safely locked away inside his vault-like apartments. He becomes the ultimate voyeur, habitually spying on strangers, neighbors and friends—not to mention his enemies. As in the wheel games of

his youth, Tarden enjoys seeing whether he can influence other people's lives and challenge their established perceptions without their being aware of his intervention. Playing with and defeating others gives him the illusion of being in control. Tarden's is a sad and empty life, in which his need for control has alienated him from everyone around him.

Chapter four examines *Blind Date* (1977) as a text of transition. Levanter is an entirely different sort of Kosinskian man. More open to others than the protagonists of *Steps* or *Cockpit*, and less prone to fantasies of control, Levanter comes closer than any of the previous protagonists to reentering society. *Blind Date* is a much lighter novel than *Cockpit*. In many ways, his 1977 book is his most optimistic work. As in *Being There*, Kosinski's sense of humour is on prominent display throughout. *Blind Date* has much less riding on it, the life of a small investor being an inherently smaller canvas than the adventures of a merciless government operative. This sixth novel is especially significant because it is more biographical than any of Kosinski's work up to the moment of its publication. Many of his friends and acquaintances, as well as a character with an uncanny resemblance to his first wife, are included as characters in *Blind Date*. As a result, the book leaves the impression that Kosinski has opened his life more fully to his readers. Levanter's blind dates with destiny constitute the bulk of the novel. This protagonist takes nothing for granted: he is prepared for his blind dates and accepts each with equanimity. To Levanter control is illusory and futile; as a result, he is better able to accept defeats and disappointments. In the course of the novel, he marries, feels guilt over causing others anguish, tries to redress injustice whenever he encounters it, and even cares for his wife after she becomes terminally ill. He appears to be growing up and accepting responsibility. Though it is uncertain whether the changes are permanent, the Kosinskian man present in *Blind Date* appears to have turned a corner of sorts and is prepared to reengage with others.

The fifth chapter probes the painful process of deterioration that the final three Kosinskian men—in *Passion Play* (1979), *Pinball* (1982 and revised in 1983) and *Hermit*—pass through as their lives wind down. The chapter also explores the personal and professional crises through which Kosinski was suffering during this period. The last Kosinskian men, Fabian, Patrick Domostroy and Norbert Kosky are desperate individuals. Nothing ever seems to go their way. Beaten down by life, they are physical and emotional wrecks. The erosion of their talent, health, mental acuity and virility makes it hard for them to display the sort of reassurance that has previously come to characterize the Kosinskian man. This, in turn, affects the way in which others perceive them. In his own life, Kosinski was going through something similar—a crisis of confidence—as the *Village Voice* made a number of damaging allegations against him, including a charge that he had made excessive use of editors in the production of his novels and had borrowed ideas from other writers. Kosinski responded by creating an autofictional novel, *Hermit*, which sought to clear his name. In *Hermit*, Kosinski uses footnotes and quotations—and only the bare bones of a plot—in providing the reader with a guided tour through the writing process. *Hermit's* intertextual approach allows Kosinski to ensure that he would never again be accused of appropriating the work of other authors. In *Hermit*, Kosinski takes the reader inside his crisis—and by implication, his own survival experience. His vulnerability is present throughout this text. *Hermit* is an experiment in form in which Kosinski reveals what he must do, as a writer, to produce a novel. It is an attempt to open the process up, to reveal that his writing is indeed informed by the work of other authors, but that this does not make *Hermit*—nor any of the other novels—any less his work.

*

In these novels, Jerzy Kosinski struggles to reconcile himself to a number of unresolved issues, not the least of which is his survival experience. Kosinski was clearly consumed by what he had lived through as a young boy, and he returns to it time and again in his novels and interviews. Like many survivors, he never seems to have completely recovered. It was his obsession. And it came to define who he was. The rest of his life was organized in order to preempt being hurt or abandoned by others—even if this meant preempting others by hurting or abandoning them first.[2] It seems possible that after the war, Kosinski could not feel completely at ease anywhere. He loathed the idea of being a victim. Even his immigration to America did not seem to move him away from his wartime childhood. Ironically, his trip across the Atlantic only seemed to bring him closer to it, allowing him—in some odd way—to become so in tune with the boy he had once been that he was able to transmogrify his experiences into an important work of fiction. *The Painted Bird* made Kosinski's reputation as a writer. There is a verisimilitude inherent in this work. Kosinski is clearly attempting to convey to his readers some version of his personal truth.

Kosinski wished to explore the psychic wounds which the survivor inevitably sustains. From a variety of different angles, his fiction attempts to answer the question of what might happen to an individual survivor as he makes his way through the rest of his life. For such men, the war would never be completely over. Though he might have wished to, Kosinski could not return to the world he had known before the war. It was gone. All he had left were his memories. In one way or another, Kosinski remained a displaced person until the moment of his suicide. The war influenced every aspect of his life and the way in which he experienced the world. For example, most of Kosinski's work does not contain individual antagonists. Instead, Kosinski conceived society itself as being at war with the

[2]One of Kosinski's associates, a Toronto author and producer named Jack Kuper, was so hurt and disturbed by Kosinski's having dropped him as a friend that he felt compelled to make a documentary about his experience entitled *Who Was Jerzy Kosinski?*

individual. In his experience, under the Nazis and then the communists, groups pose an inherent risk to the autonomy of the individual. Kosinski seems to have struggled with the notion of belonging to any established community or group. Even when he was eventually accepted by others, such as his New York friends, Kosinski seems to have approached his interpersonal relationships with a healthy dose of incredulity. The layers of identity that he created were a way of insulating himself from others. He could be the life of any party, but in the end, Kosinski could not bring himself to trust others with the truth of his life, whatever it might have been. And this truth could well have been far more or far less brutal than the life recounted in his first novel.

This work looks at Kosinski's fiction in terms of the evolution of his protagonists. From *The Painted Bird* onward, the Kosinskian protagonists are all survivors, growing and changing over a lifetime. Understanding the Kosinskian protagonist is essential to appreciating Kosinski's fiction. Throughout the majority of the first novel, the boy is a helpless victim of circumstance. As an outsider, he differs in a number of ways from those around him and suffers because of it. He searches for, but never finds, any reasonable explanation for the horrors to which he has been subjected. Only near the end of the novel does he resolve to take things into his own hands. The reader is left wondering what will become of the boy as he matures. Will he eventually learn to trust? Or will he be consumed by the agonizing memory of what he has lived through? The nameless protagonist of *Steps*, it might be argued, is an answer to these queries. The first fully-grown Kosinskian man, he resolves to remain in control, come what may. If all of a man's life is to be spent giving or taking orders, he will aspire to the former. He wants to be the man in charge, not just another follower. The rest of Kosinski's fiction concerns itself with his protagonists' struggle for control over their social environment. Though they succeed to differing degrees, Kosinski's protagonists are united by their need to stay firmly in charge of their lives, never ceding authority to anyone.

Kosinski's main characters tend to be men who are emotionally impaired. Unable to form stable attachments, they withdraw into their own world, where they hide from and/or manipulate those around them. More than anything, they wish to impose order on the chaos of their lives. For the boy of *The Painted Bird*, this is an impossibility. Even his trusty, life-giving comet—the ultimate symbol of autonomy—cannot always protect him. Disorder follows him. Overwhelmed by what is happening to him and entirely ill-equipped for his ordeal, he spends his life attempting to survive the moment in which he finds himself, unable to effect any significant change in his situation. Starved of affection, he lives in fear of other people. Long before he loses his capacity for oral speech, he resigns himself to the futility of trying to communicate with other people. After the war, he cannot bring himself to reengage with others. Even his parents are strangers to him. In the novels after *The Painted Bird*, the protagonists are emotionally inaccessible, capable of rationalizing virtually any behaviour, no matter how extreme. Everything that subsequently transpires in the lives of each of Kosinski's protagonists can in some way be related back to their emotional injuries, inflicted on them during childhood. Unable and unwilling to form stable relationships, they instead seek to overwhelm those whom they encounter. The protagonist of *Steps*, for example, feels that he must demonstrate his dominance. Convinced that others see him as an object, he protects himself by adopting a similar view. He absolves himself of responsibility for even his most dirty tricks by telling himself that he is merely safeguarding his own life.

Above all, the protagonists of Kosinski's work wish to impose some sense of order on their lives, to transform their victimhood into control. This is the starting point for much of Kosinski's fiction: a man alone, searching for coherence in the post-Holocaust world. Always looming somewhere in the background is "a projection of the nightmarish landscape of wartime Poland." (Aldridge 1983, 60) Kosinski's novels methodically and clinically probe the lives of a series of shattered men. These survivors are consumed by an

unremitting sense of emptiness. In *Steps* (and subsequent novels such as *Cockpit*), the protagonist has lost touch with society and no longer functions as a coherent self. The extreme nature of his alienation leads him to create elaborate masks behind which to hide. What he really wants is to heal himself, but his wounds are too severe. He cannot bring himself to reengage with those around him. After the war, he refuses to believe that other people's intentions could ever be truly benign. The Kosinskian man does not have allies or partners to accompany him through life. He is a loner, one way or another. The survival experience has tainted every moment of his life, not only his childhood. Everything else that he says, does and believes relates back to this basic point. The Kosinskian man is still attracted by the idea of reintegrating into society, but in the end he does nothing more than go through the motions. He is a survivor, and this remains his primary interest.

In the novels after *The Painted Bird*, the Kosinskian man nimbly moves through society, but he is not of it. He merely mimics the behaviour of those around him, blending in and going along, in the manner of a sociopath. His attempts at belonging are nearly all abortive: he has a tin ear when it comes to dealing with others. Never having learned how to relate to others, the Kosinskian man ends up crushing the life out of his relationships, romantic or otherwise. He loves being in a position of dominance and never thinks twice over violating another people's privacy. Like a reality TV game show contestant, he aims to outwit, outplay and outlast those he perceives as enemies. At their core, there is something missing from these protagonists. They are emotionally damaged, struggling for the upper hand, even when there is no apparent need to do so. They feel compelled to exert a nearly superhuman control over their lives.

Early on, the protagonist of *Steps*, and later, other protagonists such as Tarden in *Cockpit*, come to the conclusion that it is best to keep their identities in a state of flux. Why is this so? By constantly changing into something else, no one is ever given a chance to really

know them. Again, the protagonists' primary interest is in control. Engaging with other people would tend to leave them vulnerable. Trust does not come easily to any of Kosinski's protagonists. Indeed, only one character, Levanter in *Blind Date*, is able to reconcile himself to the reality that he will never achieve total control. The only protagonist who demonstrates faith in other people is Chance, the childlike protagonist of *Being There*. His lack of experience leads him to simply accept people at face value. He does not suspect others of having ulterior motives. For the Kosinskian men who will be discussed in this work, however, this is not the case. Their survival causes them to perceive the world in much starker terms. For the protagonists of *The Painted Bird*, *Steps*, *Cockpit*, *Blind Date*, *Passion Play*, *Pinball* and *Hermit*, World War II was only a prologue to another, more personal battle, what one scholar referred to as the "challenge of surviving survival." (Lindeman 1994, 109)

This supposition, that Kosinski's work is about a protagonist damaged beyond healing, who then embarks on a lifelong struggle to remain in control, lies at the heart of the argument put forward in this work. Jerzy Kosinski's life was spent grappling with the question of how victimhood could somehow be transformed into control. There are a number of other questions raised by Kosinski's work. Why, for example, does the Kosinskian man so enjoy games? Is he emotionally numb or are his often disturbing behaviours caused by anger and resentment? Will his victories over others make him feel more complete? Can he ever permit himself to reengage with others? Why are his rituals so important to him? What do they represent? Why does Kosinski use a fragmented structure in most of his novels? How large a role should autobiography play in any analysis of Kosinski's fiction? The remainder of this work will attempt to postulate an answer to these and many other questions about Kosinski's novels.

After an introductory chapter putting Kosinski's work into a social and intellectual context, there will be four other chapters surveying seven of the nine novels. In the first of these chapters, *The Painted Bird* is utilized as a guide to understanding *Steps*. This will allow the reader to see the origins of the Kosinskian protagonist. In the first novel, the boy struggles to find the cause of his suffering. Why do the peasants hold him in such contempt? What purpose does his suffering serve? Is there some logical explanation for what he has lived through? Only near the end of the first novel does he realize the importance of taking control of events. In *Steps*, the boy has evolved into the first Kosinskian man, who is proactive and seeks to take charge of events. He knows how painful it is to be a victim and he is determined to assume responsibility for his own destiny. He seeks to gain and stay in control—and he never allows himself to be mistreated by other people. If people hurt him, he strikes back, often with much greater fierceness than the original aggressor had employed against him.

Looking at Kosinski's books as a totality, the reader cannot help noting how each new protagonist differs from his predecessors. While the protagonists of Kosinski's various works share much in common—a certain resourcefulness and willful, even wily determination—they are hardly identical. Their individual priorities are constantly shifting and evolving. While at first there may not appear to be any significant differences between *Cockpit* and *Blind Date*, a closer reading reveals that they are actually quite different. In broad terms, Tarden, the protagonist of *Cockpit*, is virtually incapable of trust, whereas Levanter, in *Blind Date*, is more open to reengaging with other people. As a government agent, Tarden finds it prudent not to depend on any one beside himself; as a small investor, Levanter spends his life making deals with other people. In Kosinski's later works, the Kosinskian protagonist is an older man, embarking on the crisis of middle age. His body, his career and his libido are not what they once were and he spends much of his time in denial about his deterioration. To say the least, the final Kosinskian men,

Fabian, Patrick Domostroy and Norbert Kosky, are sad imitations of the virile and suave, if sometimes overconfident character whom the reader first encounters in *Steps*.

Because of the emphasis on the Kosinskian man in this work, two novels, *Being There* and *The Devil Tree* were not given chapter length treatments. Although relevant to any discussion of Kosinski's fiction, they do not contain a Kosinskian survivor protagonist. Nevertheless, these novels are discussed wherever relevant. Clearly, Chance and Whalen are different sorts of victims. Chance is a victim of the culture that surrounds him. The easy and mindless representations of life on television have destroyed his ability to respond to the events of his own life. Whalen, on the other hand, is the product of his family's wretched excesses. He is so unsure of his place in the world that he does not even know what to rebel against. Furious at his dead parents, he spends his life lashing out at symbols. Both Whalen and Chance are significant protagonists, but they embody different parts of who the Kosinskian man is. Like the other protagonists, Chance and Whalen are first and foremost victims, Whalen an emotionally vacant, spoiled rich kid, totally unable to relate to how others live. Chance has other problems. On account of his vacuity, he can never truly interact with others, nor understand what is going on around him. Being unable to connect to other people, he is merely a pleasing repository for others' hopes and dreams.

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One question that remains, after examining Kosinski's work at length: where does Jerzy Kosinski the man fit into all this? Most authors are not quite so identified with the works that they created. Throughout his life, Kosinski had to contend with the fact that he was far more famous than his novels. This was due, in part, to his frequent, rather self-serving appearances on network talk shows. In addition, his work has a confessional quality, and

seemed to let the reader in on a secret. Yet Kosinski was careful not to reveal too much about himself. As a result, or perhaps to address what he perceived as personal inadequacies, he made up elaborate and often fictitious stories about his early life. It is most curious that no one—at least in print—ever challenged these stories. In 1982, the myth that Kosinski had been purposefully building for many years unraveled in the most public, undignified and unpleasant manner imaginable. A media feeding frenzy ensued. His reputation would never be the same.

The scandal began simply, with a newspaper story, and then expanded to include a number of serious new allegations. Kosinski was accused of being a congenital liar, a plagiarizer, an ungrateful and manipulative opportunist, a CIA operative and a sexual pervert, with a morbid sense of humour. Even before the 1982 *Village Voice* article, however, rumours had swirled around Kosinski. Some were outrageous. For example, after the publication of his first novel, a literary editor at *The Nation* claimed that two Poles had visited her office protesting that "[*The*] *Painted Bird* had been written by a Polish Jew who was killed in a concentration camp and that the manuscript had somehow gotten out." (Taylor 1991, 30) Long before there was a world wide web, Kosinski had become a sort of living urban legend. Though certain parts of the *Village Voice* article have been debunked in the last twenty years, a number of controversies continue to surround Kosinski. Clearly Kosinski brought some of this on himself, since he could not rid himself of the habit of continually hiding behind (and within) his lies. Virtually every public statement he made had at least some element of spin within it. Kosinski found it difficult to ever give a straight answer about his life. Be that as it may, the scope of this present work does not allow any elaborate reexamination of this jumble of conflicting and often contradictory information. Many have tried and most have not come to any definitive conclusions. The position that this work takes is that Kosinski is the author of his books. He created works of the imagination, rather than personal diaries or historical treatises on

Polish peasantry. *The Painted Bird* is a nameless boy's recollections of what happened to him during the war. Of course *The Painted Bird* has some of its author within it, but it is not Jerzy Kosinski's autobiography. It is a work of fantasy and thus a work of fiction.

The work that you are about to read does not seek to unlock the dark secret of who Jerzy Kosinski really was, nor does it try to expand upon Kosinski's life story. Instead, it attempts to enhance the reader's appreciation of Kosinski's fiction. Nevertheless, it was hard not to keep bumping into Kosinski the man. He is there on virtually every page of his fiction: one has only to look for him, especially in the books after *Cockpit*. As in his life, Kosinski loved to entertain. He always wanted to be the life of the party, and the centre of attention. He wished those with whom he came in contact to reevaluate their established notions. His books are thus filled with impossible puzzles, outrageous situations and memorable characters. It would seem that Kosinski the writer and Kosinski the man were equally adept at creating drama.

The experience of reading one of Kosinski's novels is entirely unique. His view of the world is unsettling, to put it mildly. This is even true of the comic novel *Being There*, in which the elite of American society are shown to be incapable of discerning an illiterate gardener from an intellectual heavyweight. Though fun to read, *Being There* raises questions about the vapidity of the mass media and the degree to which people are ignorant of the motives of those seeking to lead them. In the other novels, the topics that Kosinski typically writes about, revenge, escape, hiding, fear, paranoia and isolation, create a claustrophobic ambience. The Holocaust haunts the atmosphere of all of his work: it even finds its way into *The Devil Tree*, a novel centered around an American protagonist too young to have survived the war. In a 1971 interview, Kosinski told *The Washington Post* "to me, life is lying under the train." (Allen 1971, B6) This reference to an incident in *The Painted Bird*, where the boy lies on the tracks while trains pass over

him, is especially telling. Decades removed from the war, it is apparent that Kosinski saw his life as an ordeal of survival and as colored by the events of his childhood. This is reflected in all of his fiction. Under the train, a man is totally alone, relying only on himself and luck as he experiences the noise, heat, speed and danger of the massive moving vehicle. Surviving such an ordeal might serve to reinvigorate one's love of life, but it could just as easily prove fatal. Kosinski nevertheless needed this, or similar, visceral thrills in order to feel truly alive. The way Kosinski lived, playing fast and loose with the truth for so many years, may have been a similar way of tempting fate. In 1982, with the *Village Voice* scandal, one might argue that the train finally caught up to him.

Kosinski was always ambivalent about his place in the world. He never seemed entirely sure of himself. Was he was an outsider looking in or an insider peering out? After the scandal, he must have been even more perplexed. Would he be remembered as a hack and a fraud? He had worked for many years to establish himself as a respected novelist. Was all of this lost? Only time will tell and Kosinski may have known that he would not live long enough to know the answer to this question. Part of the reason for selecting Kosinski as a research subject had to do with the number of misperceptions surrounding his life. There was a desire to put things straight by sorting through his work and placing it in a new context. At this time, *The Painted Bird* seems destined to remain a classic of twentieth century literature. It has held up well since its publication in 1965 and continues to be read in university courses. *Steps*, the winner of the 1969 National Book Award, is significant because of its audacious style. Consisting of brief vignettes lacking any chronological relationship to one another, this book tends to evoke powerful responses in those who have read it.

In 1991, Kosinski committed suicide. Why did he do this? Where had it all gone so wrong? For Kosinski, life was always about survival and control. If a man did not live life

to the fullest, what was the point of being alive at all? Kosinski's suicide (and maybe every suicide) can be interpreted as an attempt to take control—not of one's life, but of one's death. In Kosinski's *The Art of the Self: Essays À Propos Steps*, he writes:

> Suicide implies taking over a natural function. To die in nature's time is to accede to a denial of man's dignity: to die in one's own time is to affirm that dignity. Suicide proves man's power to choose—his final act, if nothing else. The possibility of such choice comforts him in the face of the predictable. (The Art of the Self, 231)

Through fifty-eight years, Kosinski lived a very full life. He survived the Nazis, escaped from Poland, set up shop in an unfamiliar country, learned to write in a new language, married twice, published many books and articles, lectured at Ivy League universities, rubbed shoulders with the rich and famous, regularly appeared on television, adapted a novel for the big screen, accepted a part in a major Hollywood movie and presented the Academy Award. His existence was the virtual embodiment of the Chinese curse, "May you live in interesting times." Kosinski's life was anything but boring; indeed, until the scandal, it was an American dream come true. Could it be that he felt that in the aftermath of the scandal, he was no longer able to do the things that made him Jerzy Kosinski?

The *Village Voice* article both humiliated and engrossed him. He wanted to do something dramatic to protest his innocence. His final book, *The Hermit of 69th Street* was designed to do this, employing what Kosinski termed 'autofiction' to open up the creative process to the reader. For good or ill, he felt that future generations must know that his work was indeed his own. In that sense, if in no other, *Hermit* was a success. Kosinski reasoned that his response to the *Village Voice's* allegations should be highly personal. As a result, he wrote a book about a novelist who suffers terribly after being labeled a fraud in the media. In *Hermit*, Kosinski is up to his old tricks, further smudging the boundaries between objective fact, memory and imagination. At the conclusion of *Hermit*, Norbert Kosky, the

final, worn out version of the Kosinskian man, lies dead. Yet his death comes as something of a relief. His character had been assassinated some time before his physical death and his continued existence had become painfully empty and desperate. Is this a case of art imitating life? Once again, the reader cannot help wondering how much of Kosinski was in his (auto)fiction.

From *The Painted Bird* onward, Kosinski had made a career out of leaving his readers wondering how much or how little of him was in his novels, and his interviews never seemed to resolve anything in that respect. If anything, they seemed to further cloud the issue. In the end, he preferred that every reader decide this question independently. What is clear, however, is that *Hermit* completed the life cycle of the Kosinskian protagonist. After this point, Kosinski may have viewed his life work as having been completed. Continuing to add material to that which was already finished may have seemed anathema to a man like Kosinski. He could not abide being thought of as someone who had overstayed his welcome, or worse, grown irrelevant. His suicide—which he described in his farewell note to his wife Kiki as, putting "myself to sleep for a bit longer than usual. Call the time Eternity"—might be seen as a punctuation mark at the end of a long sentence. (Sloan 1996, 445) Is it possible that he may not have had anything further to say to his readers?

CHAPTER ONE

KOSINSKI IN CONTEXT

SECTION I - THE LIFE OF JERZY KOSINSKI

Jerzy Kosinski was originally born Jerzy Nikodem Lewinkopf on June 14, 1933, in Lódz, Poland. His parents, Elzbieta and Moses Lewinkopf, were an enlightened Jewish couple with wide-ranging interests in art, literature and science. By all accounts, his mother was a fashionable woman with an ear for music, while his father was a perceptive, erudite and hardworking merchant with a keen appreciation of politics. Early on, Moses Lewinkopf discerned that his family's survival would ultimately hinge on his proficiency in manipulating the precise details of their lives.[1] Changing the family's name from Lewinkopf to the relatively common Kosinski, was just the first stage in this process of reinvention. Moses and Elzbieta and their son, had to convince their neighbors that they were non-Jews. After the war, and for the rest of his life, Jerzy Kosinski remained fascinated by the idea of manipulating and distorting his own identity. Indeed, it could be argued that Kosinski invented himself every bit as much as he invented his protagonists. In his American incarnation, Kosinski enjoyed wandering about Manhattan in disguise, pretending to be someone he was not. Indeed, even his two nonfiction texts, *The Future is Ours, Comrade* (1960) and *No Third Path* (1962)—both critiques of collectivist society in the Soviet Union—were published under the pseudonym Joseph Novak. Early on in his career, he sometimes denied that he was Jewish. (Sloan 1996, 246) Hiding and distorting his identity became second nature long before the publication of *The Painted Bird* (1965). It is no coincidence then that these themes recur throughout his writing. As James Park Sloan remarks in his biography of Kosinski, "of all the things stolen from him

[1]James Park Sloan also reports that Moses Lewinkopf had had the foresight to convert much of the family's assets into American currency. (Sloan 1996, 19)

by the war, the most precious of all may have been a comfortable acceptance of his basic identity." (Sloan 1996, 247) After surviving the war, Kosinski's family returned to Lódz, where he completed school before going on to university. As an adolescent, Kosinski was quite precocious, so much so that his parents were not sure how to go about controlling his behaviour. For example, he often snuck out of the family's apartment very late at night to wander the streets. Eventually, the family hired a live-in nanny to make sure that Kosinski did not injure Henryk Kosinski, his adopted brother. Sloan speculates that Kosinski's wild side was a "response to years of being cooped up." (Sloan 1996, 57)

In high school, Kosinski had a number of close friends and acquaintances. And he did not seem to have any trouble attracting girlfriends. He also developed a lifelong interest in photography. Though he was still relatively young, Kosinski's iconoclastic side was already beginning to emerge. He frequently ran afoul of the Party's youth organization and was eventually expelled from it. Clearly Kosinski felt increasingly restricted by his life in Lódz. Despite his problems with the Party, Kosinski was able to impress a number of professors with his keen intellect and was eventually admitted to the University of Lódz. In 1951 he began his studies towards an M.A. in political science (which he received in 1953) and a second M.A. in history (which was completed in 1955). In 1957 he was accepted into a doctoral program in sociology at Columbia University. While Kosinski's departure from Poland was certainly not as cloak and dagger as the protagonist's in *Cockpit* (1975)—in actual fact, Kosinski was simply allowed to leave to study in America during a brief unfreezing of relations between the Soviet Bloc and the West in the late 1950s—his nonfiction texts leave no doubt about his resentment at having to expend his youth under yet another form of totalitarian government.

The Novak books closely examine life in the Soviet Union. At the centre of each citizen's life, Novak informs the reader, is the Party. It hangs like a foreboding cloud over every

aspect of life. In his travels, Novak tends to encounter two types of people: 1) dupes who have been entirely corrupted by State Socialism and parrot propagandistic slogans and 2) those cowering in fear, unwilling to voice their true reservations for fear of retribution. Clearly Kosinski identifies most with these latter individuals, who must live secret lives but who remain individuals, at least in the privacy of their own thoughts.[2] The Novak texts have an episodic style: each of the vignettes in the books may be read like a short story. The narrator never comments on what he has seen, that is, on the meaning of each episode. This spartan (and scientific) manner of writing, of letting the character's short descriptions of their experiences speak for themselves, without embellishment, creates a feeling of ominousness. It is impossible to miss that the people are miserable. Here, in his nonfiction it is easy to see Kosinski's burgeoning interest in powerlessness—a theme that will recur throughout his fiction. His nonfiction sets out to examine a political culture, but like all of Kosinski's work, it tends to focus more on specific individuals who are caught up within the system.

In the end, Kosinski failed to complete his doctorate. However, in 1958 (less than a year after his arrival in America), he was able to secure a contract with a major publishing house for the production of a book about the Soviet Union. (Sloan 1996, 110) It was the seeming ease with which he was able to secure his book deal that fueled suspicion that his success was not as effortless as it appeared. It is possible that a CIA program to encourage the production of anti-communist texts may have been behind Doubleday's decision to publish Kosinski's book. One way or another, the success of this first book was a major turning point in Kosinski's life, both professionally and personally. Though it is impossible to confirm the veracity of this story, Kosinski claimed that *The Future is Ours, Comrade* eventually brought him into contact with Mary Weir—perhaps when she

[2]Czeslaw Milosz, in his seminal volume, *The Captive Mind* (1953), referred to this latter phenomenon as Ethical Ketman, a condition whereby citizens outwardly conform to community norms while within their own thoughts, they continue to harbour political skepticism.

wrote him a fan letter. Mary Weir, a woman eighteen years older than Kosinski, was the widow of wealthy industrialist, Ernest Weir. He had died about four years before Mary Weir's first meeting with Kosinski. In January 1962, a year or so after they met, Mary Weir and Kosinski were married. A month later, his second book, *No Third Path*, was published. Unfortunately, the reviews for the second book were not as positive as for the first. By this point, Kosinski seems to have realized that his future as a writer lay not in academia, but in fiction. And the world of wealth and luxury to which Mary Weir had exposed Kosinski would be the subject of a number of his novels.

It is clear that Kosinski would never be characterized as a conventional husband. He maintained a separate apartment, continued to visit various girlfriends and miscellaneous prostitutes and developed the habit of running around Manhattan until all hours of the night. After *No Third Path*, Kosinski immersed himself in his next project: reworking a number of stories (which he had invented about himself to impress others) into an oddly personal piece of fiction. The story, about a boy who becomes separated from his parents during the Second World War, is a compelling recollection of the most brutal childhood imaginable. Kosinski reconceives the Holocaust through the eyes of a naive child, desperately struggling to understand the reason for the chaos and suffering surrounding him. Clearly *The Painted Bird* is Kosinski's most organic work. All the overlapping elements that he includes in this novel (eroticism, fairy tales, violence, horror and magic, to mention a few) fit together so seamlessly that Kosinski's first novel feels like an act of perfect catharsis. In trying to finally put his painful childhood behind him, he was somehow able to create an unbelievably satisfying fiction, easily his best novel. In preparing the final manuscript of *The Painted Bird*, it seems likely that Kosinski received some editorial assistance in taking the hard edges off his often raw prose. This would come back to haunt him years later, when the *Village Voice* began to unravel Kosinski's carefully constructed personal history.

Despite his success in having two books published within five years of his arrival in America, Kosinski had a difficult time finding a publisher for his novel. Many of them did not know what to make of Kosinski's disturbing book. Some saw it as a vivid autobiographical account, while others felt that it more closely resembled a novel. Kosinski enjoyed the confusion that his work created and would never really come down on one side or the other. He felt that each reader should decide for himself or herself the origins of the book. From the minute that Houghton Mifflin decided to publish the book, there were a number of difficulties. At first, they wanted to make several important cuts to the book, including deleting the epilogue, which explained that the boy later grew up and escaped to the West. (Sloan 1996, 215-216) In addition, a number of Houghton Mifflin's attorneys felt that certain of the more graphic sections of the book verged on the obscene. They recommended a number of changes to the text that would render the book less inflammatory. Kosinski reluctantly made a few of the recommended changes, but in the end refused to go as far as the lawyers might have liked. He was leery of upsetting the book's carefully orchestrated interplay between realistic and poetic elements. (Sloan 1996, 213)

Just as the book was finally going to press, Kosinski demanded to be allowed to make several changes in the galleys. This was to become an obsession of Kosinski's: an overpowering need to heavily revise his own books, even as they were about to be published—and sometimes after, as in the case of *The Devil Tree* (1973) and *The Hermit of 69th Street: The Working Papers of Norbert Kosky* (1988). Because of the confusion surrounding the origin of the book, Kosinski undertook to create a detailed explanation of what he was trying to achieve in *The Painted Bird.* This was Kosinski's *Notes of the Author on The Painted Bird*, which somehow became appended to the German edition,

but was later published as a separate booklet.[3] Though *The Painted Bird* did not do well in hardcover, the book quickly gained a cult following at various universities, with Kosinski himself beginning to be seen as an "Audie Murphy of the Holocaust, a man who had been to Hell and returned to write it up." (Sloan 1996, 227) *The Painted Bird* also won a number of awards, including the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger, the French award for the foreign book of the year. In Poland, however, *The Painted Bird* was excoriated by the officially controlled press as a national slander.

Meanwhile, Mary Weir's alcoholism and depression, conditions she had been suffering from even before meeting Kosinski, began to grow worse. Mary Weir divorced Kosinski in early 1966, only a few months after the publication of his first novel and four years after they first exchanged marriage vows.[4] Kosinski soon began seeing Kiki von Fraunhofer, whom he would marry years later. Kiki played a unique role in Kosinski's life: she was an enthusiastic, patient and supportive partner to him, keeping all his documents catalogued, and typing up whatever he wrote. She loved him unconditionally and wished more than anything to help Kosinski with whatever project that he might wish to undertake. It appears that she viewed each of Kosinski's idiosyncrasies (e.g. the games he loved to play) as either endearing or as a component in his creative process. The things he did and experienced would inevitably end up in his novels, so she learned to tolerate behaviour—such as his frequent visits to S & M clubs—that might otherwise have been viewed with incredulity. In today's vernacular, Kiki might be termed an enabler. At any rate, she was to become a permanent fixture in Kosinski's life for the next thirty years.

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[3]Three years later, this time after the publication of *Steps*, Kosinski created a similar document entitled *The Art of the Self: Essays À Propos Steps*.

[4]About two and a half years later, Mary Weir died in her Manhattan townhouse after consuming lethal amounts of alcohol.

Having children did not much seem to interest Kosinski. Nevertheless, he often played with interviewers, telling them different stories about his illegitimate offspring. For example, in 1980, he told Nancy Collins, a reporter from *The Washington Star*, that he had three children, two in Poland and another on Long Island. When she asked if he was curious about the latter child, Kosinski replied, "No. I am curious about grown-ups, not children. (Collins 1980, 189) In his last interview, in 1991, Kosinski admitted that he did not actually have any children.

> A child is an enormous responsibility and an investment in time. I don't think in terms of the future. If a child would grow in 24 hours to be 18, I would have a great number of children. (Gefen 1991, 235)

Because he did not have any of his own, Kosinski compensated by being "extremely generous with the children of his friends." (Taylor 1991, 31) Perhaps not totally sarcastically, Kosinski was also fond of saying that his novels were his children. To be sure, the people around Kosinski and his wife—often wealthy and influential men and women—behaved as a sort of surrogate family. The Kosinskis were invited to all the most important dinner parties in New York and spent a good part of each year moving between the various mansions and yachts of their friends.

In order to facilitate the completion of his second novel, Kosinski applied for and received a Guggeneheim fellowship. *Steps* (1968) was a totally different sort of novel than *The Painted Bird.* Totally random fragments from a nameless protagonist's life make up the body of the text. Kosinski developed this technique for the purpose of mimicking human memory, which he contended was almost entirely random and episodic. Interspersed throughout the text are snatches of conversation between the protagonist and his woman friend. Kosinski was displeased with the manner in which his earlier novel had been promoted by Houghton Mifflin and decided to change publishers, to Random House.

This was a prophetic decision. It was through his connections there that Kosinski was able to network with a number of other significant authors, including William Styron. Styron and his wife Rose provided Kosinski with the opportunity to enter the upper echelons of New York society. It was also around this point in Kosinski's life, following the publication of *Steps* in 1968 and the huge success of *The Painted Bird* (once it was released in paperback, with a Bosch painting reproduced on the cover) that he began to get invitations to teach at prestigious schools including Yale and Princeton. One year later, in 1969, Kosinski received the ultimate honor when *Steps* won the National Book Award. It was also in 1969 that Kosinski claimed to have narrowly missed being in Sharon Tate's house the night of the Manson family murders.

From 1969 to the fall of 1970, Kosinski worked on a reconception of a Polish novel he had read years before called *The Career of Nikodem Dyzma*. *Being There* (1971) was the story of an illiterate gardener, Chance, whose simpleminded platitudes, derived from watching TV, are mistaken for trenchant political insight. Soon the protagonist finds himself rubbing shoulders with the elite of American society. The analogy with how Kosinski might have seen himself, as an ordinary man suddenly elevated to the status of minor celebrity, is hard to miss. Indeed, it might be argued that Kosinski was satirizing the very people who were inviting him to their cocktail parties. *Being There* was Kosinski's first attempt at a structurally conventional story. The book was well received by critics and sold nicely in hardcover. For the first time, Kosinski was given a substantial advance for his work. If *The Painted Bird* and *Steps* were his most important novels, *Being There* was arguably his most widely known, especially after it became a Hal Ashby movie (for which Kosinski wrote the screenplay) in 1980. Because of the popularity of *Being There*, Kosinski found that he was now a sought after subject for in-depth interviews with mass circulation magazines and newspapers. He also had the opportunity to appear on network television talk shows where his skills as a raconteur made him a

popular guest. Just as Chance's appearance on *This Evening* brought him to the attention of the American public, so Kosinski's appearances on *The Tonight Show* made him one of the best known authors in the country. He employed television as the ultimate networking tool. Kosinski's circle of friends soon included actors, writers, commentators, critics, politicians, scientists, entrepreneurs and journalists.

In 1973, Kosinski published a new novel with a similar structure to *Steps*. *The Devil Tree* is a grim tale of the American dream gone horribly awry. A young, articulate, attractive super-wealthy protagonist struggles to define his own life, in the shadow of an overbearing father and a passive aggressive mother. His wealth should be an incredible advantage, but it brings him only misery. *The Devil Tree* is a stark tale in which urbanization and mass culture are portrayed as being every bit as dehumanizing as the most repressive police state. The protagonist, Jonathan Whalen is unable to form stable attachments: his life is a series of ill-conceived attempts to reassert his identity. His self-destructive proclivities are simply too powerful. Once again, Kosinski had created a text that borrowed heavily from his own life (a character whose adulthood is entirely defined in terms of his childhood)—as well as the life of Mary's son, David Weir. After the success of the first three novels, *The Devil Tree* was viewed as a tremendous disappointment. Almost every publication of note gave the book a negative review. Kosinski had a notoriously thin skin and took the reviews very much to heart (eventually rewriting the book in its entirety in 1981). Right around the time of *The Devil Tree's* original publication, in early 1973, Kosinski was elected to the presidency of PEN (the International Association of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists and Novelists) for the first of two successive one-year terms. Kosinski is said to have taken his responsibilities very seriously. Having lived behind the Iron Curtain, he understood firsthand the danger of attempting to expatiate a view that would offend the sensibilities of the ruling elite.

Although Kosinski did not teach as much during this period, he continued to write and travel extensively, often escaping from New York to ski in the Swiss Alps.

The disappointing reviews of *The Devil Tree* did not seem to scare away potential publishers. In 1975, Kosinski returned to Houghton Mifflin with *Cockpit*. This novel continued the life cycle of the Kosinskian man.[5] In this novel, the protagonist is a man so shattered by his childhood in Europe that he develops an unusual preoccupation with controlling every aspect of his existence. *Cockpit* received somewhat better reviews than *The Devil Tree*, but critics still did not feel it was as important a book as *The Painted Bird* or *Steps*. The episodic style that Kosinski had created for *Steps* was no longer seen as groundbreaking. The general consensus was that the brutality of Kosinski's vision was more designed to shock than to enlighten his readers. Again, these negative reviews did not appear to impact his sales. Kosinski's own view was that he had become "reviewer proof." (Sloan 1996, 333-334) His work tended to be so unique and his appearances on television (plugging his books) so ubiquitous and memorable that his readers tended not to care what was written about him. Somehow Kosinski's work appealed to ordinary people, who enjoyed his skillful use of language, his capacity to boil a story down to its constituent elements and his lean and powerful sentence structure. Even those who did not care for his novels had to admit that they were great fun to read. Something interesting was always taking place on the pages of these books.

In the summer of 1975, a student named Chuck Ross typed up a chapter of *Steps* and submitted the document to a number of prominent publishing houses in order to demonstrate the difficulty of getting a new novel published. This was the first of two times that Ross performed this stunt—he submitted the entire text of *Steps* in 1978. On both occasions, Kosinski's work went unrecognized and was rejected. Kosinski was

[5]This concept which will be explored at length in Section III of this chapter.

embarrassed by this episode, but the media tended to downplay the significance of Ross's prank and sales of Kosinski's novels were largely unaffected. In early 1976, Kosinski traveled to France to visit his old friend, Jacques Monod. Dying of a rare blood disease, Monod asked Kosinski, who was a highly skilled photographer, "to document his final hours." (Sloan 1996, 335) Kosinski's next novel, *Blind Date* (1977), was a kind of homage to Monod, whose scientific philosophy, that life was merely a series of random events, Kosinski made the thesis of his sixth novel. The reviews of Kosinski's 1977 novel might not have been raves, but sales of *Blind Date* were brisk, the best ever for a book by Kosinski. At this time in Kosinski's life, around the age of forty-five, he began an odd reappraisal of his religion. For the first time, he publicly identified himself as both a Jew and a survivor. Indeed, he facetiously referred to himself as "the cut-rate Elie Wiesel." (Sloan 1996, 344)

The period after *Blind Date's* publication was a hectic time in Kosinski's life. In addition to his usual appearances on television, he was simultaneously working on a new novel (about his growing interest in polo) as well as the screenplay for the big screen adaptation of *Being There*. He was also beginning plans to revise and expand *The Devil Tree*. At the same time, Warren Beatty asked Kosinski to play the part of Grigori Zinoviev in *Reds*. Kosinski's seventh novel, *Passion Play*, was published in late 1979. This novel was also episodic in structure, though its subject matter was unlike anything with which Kosinski had previously dealt. *Passion Play* was about an athlete, Fabian, who travels about looking for high stakes one-on-one polo matches. The book was so unusual that it baffled many readers. Though critics were not fond of this novel, *Passion Play* sold well enough to be termed a modest success. The film version of *Being There*, however, was another matter. By any standard, it was a smash hit. It made money, was praised by critics and garnered a number of film award nominations. Kosinski failed to receive an Academy Award nomination for his script, but he did not seem to take this turn of events

personally. Together with the stars of the film, Kosinski made the rounds promoting his film. Later on in 1980, Kosinski went to Spain to film his part in *Reds*. Warren Beatty permitted Kosinski to heavily rewrite his own lines, so his scenes with Beatty (playing journalist John Reed, author of *Ten Days That Shook the World*) sometimes sound like something that one of the Kosinskian protagonists might have said.

Upon its release in late 1981, critics singled out Kosinski's portrayal of Zinoviev as one of the film's best performances. Once again, he did not receive an Academy Award nomination. This time, however, Kosinski is said to have taken the setback in stride—especially since he did not fancy himself an actor in any case. As a sort of consolation prize, he was asked to present that year's Oscars for writing. Over 600 million people tuned in for the 1982 awards ceremony. Kosinski was his usual witty and urbane self. During this period, Kosinski completed a screenplay version of *Passion Play* as well as his eighth novel, *Pinball* (1982)—an odd tale about the hunt for a reclusive rock star. As usual, the book was badly reviewed (with some critics predictably suggesting that Kosinski would be better off taking up acting full time), but still sold well. In February 1982, there was also a noteworthy cover story in the *New York Times Magazine* about Kosinski by Barbara Gelb. Although he did not know it at the time, this piece was the beginning of the end. It once again repeated his official biography, which various reporters were beginning to question.

On June 22, 1982, Kosinski's life as he had known it effectively ended. The *Village Voice* printed an article entitled "Jerzy Kosinski's Tainted Words," which alleged that Kosinski was not the man he had professed to be. Geoffrey Stokes and Eliot Fremont-Smith painted Kosinski as an inveterate liar and exaggerator, who was so caught up in trying to shock others that he had invented vast chunks of his personal history—most especially the life he had said he lived during the war. They also alleged that he had made extensive

use of editors. Together with Jerome Klinkowitz's 1983 essay "Betrayed by Jerzy Kosinski," which documented some of the really odd behaviour that Kosinski sometimes manifested, his carefully constructed life began to unravel. Attempting to mitigate the effect of the *Village Voice* piece, Kosinski's defenders at the *New York Times* unwittingly elevated the scandal to national proportions when they published a diffuse response, predicated on the idea that the attacks on Kosinski were ideologically motivated. Over the next few months, a variety of different media outlets decided to weigh in on the controversy. Kosinski's reputation did not fair well.

The last years of his life were spent trying to rehabilitate his shattered reputation. In the vernacular of *A Clockwork Orange*, the *Village Voice* article began "the real weepy and like tragic part of the story." (Burgess 1962, 61) Though the scandal died down after a number of months, Kosinski was haunted by Stokes and Fremont-Smith's article for the rest of his life. He undertook other projects including spending time in Poland and Israel (thereby re-embracing both sides of his heritage), pursuing a number of business opportunities in Poland and taking up yoga to relax and focus his mind. He also became interested in the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel, a scholar who believed that Jewish identity was becoming too intertwined with the Holocaust. None of these side interests, however, seemed to distract Kosinski for very long from—what he perceived as—the taint of the scandal. It became his obsession. He wanted to address everything that had been said and written about him in one place and in an entirely original manner. At the time of the publication of the *Village Voice* article, Kosinski was already hard at work on a new novel. Because of the controversy, however, he entirely reconceived the book.

Between 1983 and 1988, he reworked *The Hermit of 69th Street*. By making extensive use of footnotes and citations, Kosinski wanted to leave no doubt that he was the sole creator of his previous novels. The idea was to illustrate to the reader that all writers borrow

from one another. For Kosinski, this was an inherent part of the writing process. *Hermit* functions as a guide to how and why writers write. Kosinski's final book is the realization of a concept, what he first referred to as 'autofiction' in a 1986 *Esquire* piece on the death of Jacques Monod. Kosinski's autofictional text is the place where fiction morphs into biography. It is an attempt to meld together not so much everything in the world, as everything in Jerzy Kosinski's world. This was no small undertaking. After a number of delays as he reworked the material again and again, *Hermit* was finally published in the summer of 1988. It immediately received terrible reviews, primarily from those who found his work impenetrable. For the majority of reviewers it was far too convoluted and self-indulgent to be taken seriously. Only the *Washington Post* found its "utterly original form" worthy of praise. (McCaffery 1988, 9) Because Kosinski wrote this book more for himself than for his readers (in order to demonstrate his innocence—since he had never publicly disavowed the *Village Voice's* charges), the book is not particularly readable. Instead, it consists of bizarre digressions and voluminous source material. This is deliberate: it is designed to appear as a book stopped before it could be finished, to illustrate how a novelist goes about constructing a novel. In *Hermit*, readability has been sacrificed in order to make—what Kosinski considered—a more important point about the intertextuality of the writing process. He wants the reader to accompany him inside his stream of consciousness, so that it becomes clear that only Jerzy Kosinski could have written a Jerzy Kosinski novel.

During the writing of *Hermit*, Kosinski began to notice a precipitate decline in his health. His arrhythmia, a condition he had lived with for many years, seemed to be worsening and he was not as sexually potent as he would have liked. Terrified of being incapacitated by a stroke and becoming a burden to his second wife, Kosinski began to think in terms of trying to avoid losing control of his existence. On May 3, 1991, he reached a decision that his life should not continue. While his wife slept in the next room of their modest

Manhattan apartment, Kosinski committed suicide using the method—barbiturates and asphyxiation—judged least painful and most effective by the Hemlock society. In 1992, a posthumous collection of his nonfiction entitled *Passing By* was published. It included a number of his best known articles, including "Dead Souls on Campus" and "Death in Cannes," as well as *Notes of the Author on The Painted Bird.* Today, all of Kosinski's personal papers are kept at the Spertus College of Judaica in Chicago, Illinois.

SECTION II - KOSINSKI AND THE TOTAL STATE

In one form or another, first as a child under the Nazis, then as an adolescent behind the Iron Curtain and finally as a writer of texts about life in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the totalitarian state dominated every aspect of Jerzy Kosinski's life. His emigration to America in 1957 did not seem to impact his view of the world in any measurable way. If anything, he seemed even more determined to let his readers know that regardless of which side of the Iron Curtain one lived, life was a dangerous pastime. Vigilance was the best method of preventing oneself from being victimized. In the post-Holocaust world that is the setting for so much of Kosinski's fiction, the reader learns that indoctrination, dehumanization and oppression are universal phenomena. For Kosinski, totalitarianism was the enemy of experience, a place where individuals are deliberately made to feel interchangeable and subservient to the interests of the state. In short, total terror trumps individual identity. Having been exposed to the Total State at so tender an age, Kosinski was determined never again to be its victim. Kosinski's philosophy, expatiated throughout his work, is that the interests of the individual and the collective are inherently at odds. His novels reveal the folly of permitting others to decide one's fate. In his novels, the protagonists perceive the collective as a suffocating influence. With one exception, Chance in *Being There*, his main characters are individuals struggling to stay in control of their destinies.

For Kosinski, the most important event in life is the assertion of one's individuality; there is always a steep price to be paid for abjectly surrendering one's rights. In *The Painted Bird*, the boy is hated not for anything he might have done, but rather for what the peasants have concluded that he must be: a Jewish or Gypsy orphan. When the boy is thrown into the excrement pit, he ceases to be an individual: instead, he is the peasants' stereotypical ideal of perfect evil. Even in the novels after *The Painted Bird*, when the Kosinskian protagonist grows to manhood, the threat of the Total State never seems very far away. The Kosinskian man may have escaped from Eastern Europe, but the Total State continues to live on, if only in his thoughts, overshadowing nearly every other experience. Try as he might, the Kosinskian protagonist cannot seem to overcome his earliest experiences. Even after his escape to freedom, he remains a man alone, completely alienated from the world around him. Kosinski's work tends not to take ideological sides. Despite those who see Kosinski as a Soviet basher, his view of the West could hardly be described as optimistic. In his novels, a devastating critique of life in America emerges. Americans tend to be presented as either dupes (the Rands in *Being There*), narcissistic addicts (Jonathan Whalen in *The Devil Tree*), bystanders to their own lives (the sloppy woman in *Passion Play*), vain and manipulative psychopaths (Andrea Gwynplaine in *Pinball*), grim entrepreneurs (William Kirkland in *Blind Date*), mindless followers (Goddard's legions of listeners in *Pinball*) and crass opportunists (Tarden's girlfriend, Valerie, in *Cockpit*). Kosinski portrays the West as vulnerable, albeit to a much more subtle and effective form of political manipulation. In the novels after *Steps*, set primarily in America, Kosinski presents the culture of consumption as dangerously seductive. To Kosinski, the West presents only a veneer of freedom, subtly co-opting people into believing that they have total freedom when in fact they have only limited options, political or otherwise.

Hannah Arendt, in defining totalitarianism, writes of the rise of a mass man in a mass age. (Arendt 1973, 316) Chance is an exemplar of Arendt's new man. Emotionally anesthetized, blindly obedient to authority and incapable of original thought, Chance is the ultimate conformist. The irony is that no one else can quite see it that way. Informed only by his simpleminded innocence, Chance's public pronouncements are continually being misconstrued as allegorically incisive political commentary. He is the direct outgrowth of a nation benumbed by the omnipresence of television. On TV, Chance's lack of gravitas comes across as intellectual restraint. Telegenic and a master of the art of gracefully saying nothing, Chance is off-putting to no one. His eventual ascendance to the heights of power signifies the triumph of appearance over substance. For his part, Chance remains the eternal bystander, observing, but never participating in life. The diverting fictions that he watches on television, and which form the basis of how he engages with others, have, in effect, destroyed his capacity to respond to events. From the President on down, everyone accepts Chance not for what he is (an illiterate gardener), but for what they perceive him to be (Benjamin Rand's close personal friend and advisor). Chance is a sort of living 'Rorschach' test. People project themselves onto him, using their own personalities to fill in his voluminous gaps in his own.

Under totalitarianism, there is a price to be paid for attempting to remain an individual. In *Steps*, the younger Kosinskian man describes the stultifying atmosphere in a Stalin-era university. Each student must carefully weigh the consequences of what they choose to read, write and say. The character of The Philosopher is a case in point. He is a man whose mind has become warped by the crushing societal pressure of living under such a relentless political regime. Searching for a place where he can be safe from the Party's political intrigues, he develops an unusual fixation with public lavatory stalls. To him, they are the last bastions of privacy in the Total State. Rather than accept his expulsion from university for anti-social behaviour, The Philosopher eventually commits suicide in

a stall in order to reaffirm his individuality. A. Alvarez (in reference to Tadeusz Borowski's work) describes the Total State as excising anything that might serve to better define the individual. Rather than be conscripted into a life not of his own choosing, The Philosopher opts to die. In that sense, his suicide is one last act of defiance. Like Borowski, Kosinski's work attempts to convey a particularly depersonalized vision of the world. In his novels, Kosinski portrays a totalitarianism of the inner world, as well as the external political culture. *The Painted Bird* leaves no doubt that the single most important influence on Kosinski's life, and hence his work, was the memory of his childhood in Europe. Under the Total State, the nameless young protagonist is transformed beyond recognition, into an entirely new person, who is more disconnected from the world around him.

In a 1973 interview with Jerome Klinkowitz, Kosinski stated that he saw his life in Eastern Europe as being like "living inside a novel called the "Soviet Union," created by the crude imagination of bad artists. (Klinkowitz 1973, 57) Culminating with Tarden in *Cockpit*, Kosinski's protagonists are men who are not afraid to show their individuality. They are compelled to continually outwit those around them to demonstrate that they cannot be controlled. Moreover, they never have children, which might otherwise encumber their mobility and freedom of choice. Without a traditional family life, the Kosinskian man is less vulnerable to political coercion. At other times, he fights back against the Total State in small but significant ways. For example, in *Blind Date*, Levanter comes to the aid of his old friend, JP, after he is crippled during a violent interrogation. In another, quite memorable scene, Levanter has some fun with a group of low-level Soviet bureaucrats on a skiing vacation in Europe. After overhearing their derogatory remarks about his ski equipment and their description of him as a 'Spanish waiter,' Levanter tells the group (in perfect Russian) that he is representing the Soviet Union in an international competition and accuses them of harbouring anti-collectivist proclivities. As minor

government functionaries, the Soviets instantly become servile, trying to convince Levanter that they meant no harm, and eventually resigning themselves to the inevitable investigation upon their return home. Even after leaving its territorial limits, the Total State continues to circumscribe the behaviour of its citizens, since it exists within their minds. For these feckless tourists, there is seemingly nowhere to hide.

In a letter to his publisher (later included as an "Afterward" to *The Painted Bird*), Kosinski writes that his first novel was designed to "examine this new language of brutality and its consequent new counter-language of anguish and despair." (PB Afterward, 256) The Total State had indeed left its mark on nearly every aspect of the twentieth century. After *The Painted Bird*, much of Kosinski's fiction focused on the continuing impact of totalitarianism. For Kosinski, the writer, the Total State was omnipresent in his view of the universe. As a survivor, Kosinski finds that his appraisal of the collective rectitude of the human race has been profoundly disappointed. In *Hermit*, Kosinski writes of how even the word shower, for him, will always carry a sinister double meaning. The main character, Norbert Kosky (Kosinski with the 'sin' excised), describes himself as "cracked and made decrepit by the Second World War." He feels that his only purpose is to "chronicle sin, isolation and fear." (Hermit, 450) The survival experience is so intense that it continues to govern how he sees even the most pedestrian of events. Kosinski's fiction is replete with characters whom, in the aftermath of their survival, share a similar outlook. In *The Devil Tree*, for example, Kosinski describes an ordinary supermarket in which the fruit stands are located right next to a display of poison. When someone points out to the manager that an unscrupulous person might be tempted to poison the food, the man is taken aback. He is absolutely convinced that no one would ever do anything so pointless and cruel. Kosinski seems to be reminding his readers that such things do indeed occur—and much more frequently than anyone wishes to admit.

Considering his concentration on the Self, it is unsurprising that Kosinski is adamant in rejecting the "I was only following orders" defense which so many Nazis employed to excuse their actions during the war. In *The Devil Tree*, Kosinski describes man as being unique in his capacity to say 'no' to that which he believes to be wrong. (DT, 195) Collective responsibility not only diminishes the Self but also serves to water-down moral responsibility. (PP, 35) Kosinski sees each individual as being part of a bulwark against the predominance of repressive political systems. In *Blind Date*, Levanter has the opportunity to talk to Charles Lindbergh about the war. Lindbergh explains that German ingenuity and industrial prowess led him to the conclusion that the Nazis were the future of mankind (and that their anti-Semitic laws were merely a passing fad). Hence he decided to publicly acknowledge his admiration for the Third Reich. "Mass atrocities," he explained, are "like acts of individual heroism, [which] often appear unthinkable before they occur." (BD, 102) Had he known of the camps, he argued, he would never have given his stamp of approval to the Nazis. Kosinski clearly does not buy this argument. It is a form of moral equivalence that Kosinski sees as antithetical to the notion of responsibility.

In *Cockpit*, Tarden describes how, as a child, he victimized hundreds of peasants by randomly dialing half a dozen telephone numbers each day and informing those who answered their phones that they were being resettled (and hence had to travel to the Capital in order to finalize their documents). The scene is powerful because the people whom he is victimizing are faceless. The child seems to have a unique understanding of the Total State since he grasps the dehumanizing nature of the communist bureaucracy. That people so willingly surrender their fates, without a word of protest, is infuriating to Tarden. Though a child, he has no difficulty appreciating the ultimate consequences of such resignation. When Tarden calls a sick Jewish man, convalescing from an illness, the man begs for a reprieve. Tarden considers letting the man off the hook, but first inquires

as to why the man did not immigrate to Palestine after the war. When the man replies that "destiny had decreed the Jews were to live in the homes of others," Tarden becomes furious, screaming "destiny belongs to men, not men to destiny." (Cockpit, 126) The implication is clear: it is up to each individual to actively resist becoming a component of the machinery of the Total State. Because the sick man so easily accepts his fate, Tarden refuses to relent and demands that the man make the trip to the Capital. Refusing to cooperate with subjugation is the first and most important step in freeing oneself from the collective.

Much of the power of Jerzy Kosinski's fiction derives from his proficiency in vividly bringing to life the grinding pressure of the Total State on the individual. During his life, he had the opportunity to observe totalitarianism (and its after-effects) from a variety of different angles. His fiction is informed by this knowledge and he takes unique approaches to defining and discussing the phenomenon. There is a sense of verisimilitude about each of the protagonists' experiences within the Total State, especially when the scene is more understated. In *Blind Date*, for example, Levanter is stunned when his friend, Romarkin, spontaneously poses an uncomfortable question—about Stalin's competence to discourse on matters of linguistics—during a seminar. Immediately following the lecture, Romarkin is exiled to Siberia, while Levanter is taken in for questioning. The KGB officer assigned to Levanter's case tries to coerce him into signing a document denouncing Romarkin as a dangerous subversive. Levanter refuses, knowing that the authorities would treat this as an admission that he and Romarkin were part of some deliberate conspiracy to undermine the state. Levanter realizes that he cannot begin traveling down this road and he has no choice but to turn the tables on his interrogator. He says:

> "I will never sign such a statement...Never. But remember this: one day in Siberia, I shall voluntarily admit that when I

> was at the university I was indeed a member of a conspiracy dedicated to wrecking the Party apparatus. I will produce facts and name names. And when I do, you—who will probably be a captain by then—will be accused of failing to obtain important information about the conspiracy from me during this investigation. You will be denounced for negligence. Perhaps even for being sympathetic to our cause." (BD, 51-52)

Kosinski's novels are filled with similar episodes, where the protagonists use their superior knowledge of how political systems function in order to slip out of trouble. These scenes have an element of wish fulfillment about them, as though Kosinski thinks he should have proactively resisted the Total State before he left the Eastern bloc—rather than become an outspoken critic of it after he left. Kosinski saw how true repression functioned and realized the importance of standing up to tyranny. As a writer, Kosinski could not help but be changed by the brutalization to which he was an eyewitness for nearly a quarter of a century. It is no great surprise then that his approach to life was always deeply cynical. His experiences in Eastern Europe convinced him that the individual would always be under threat from the collective. As an émigré novelist and a survivor of two of the most oppressive mass political movements in history, Kosinski saw life as a precarious proposition. His admonition to his readers—to resist capitulating to the will of the collective—informs every aspect of his work. In a world where violence and exploitation are more the norm than the exception, Kosinski's views continue to resonate today, in the post-Holocaust world.

SECTION III - DEFINING THE KOSINSKIAN MAN

In one form or another, a rather curious protagonist populates all of Kosinski's fiction. Up to this point in the discussion, there has not been a comprehensive definition offered as to who is (and who is not) a Kosinskian man. This will be clarified here. First and

foremost, the Kosinskian man sees himself as an individual rather than as part of the larger society. His primary focus is on his own wounded psyche and he feels it necessary to protect himself against those who might seek to victimize him. Abandoned and brutalized as a child, he tends to be a sullen and solitary character. His paranoia is what defines him: indeed, even after escaping to the West, he does not trust easily and has a hard time forming loving relationships. In the end, he is a man on the outside looking in, uncommonly aware of how his identity has been deformed by his survival experience, yet ultimately powerless to transcend his anguish. Over time, the reader sees the Kosinskian man change and evolve, so much so that Kosinski's fiction represents a sort of life cycle.

In *The Painted Bird* (1965), a nameless boy—a precursor to the man who will be seen throughout Kosinski's fiction—is introduced to the reader. The boy is an eternal outsider, desperately trying to grasp why he is so reviled. *The Painted Bird* is a primer on how society punishes individuality. The boy spends the novel in the fruitless attempt to avoid becoming a victim. Eventually, he learns that he must strive to dictate the events of his life, lest they be dictated to him. In the end, the boy can only feel paranoia and hatred for other people. The protagonist of *Steps* (1968) is older and more sophisticated than the boy, but it is clear that he still shares much in common with him. He will not stand idly by while others torment him. Instead, he himself assumes the role a victimizer. Rather than allowing himself to be used and abused—and to become an observer of his own life—the protagonist of *Steps* seeks out ways of controlling what happens in his life. The boy has now evolved into the first version of the Kosinskian man, a shattered protagonist to be sure, but a man obsessed with both protecting his own interests, while at the same time trying to make sense of the world.

The next Kosinskian man in Kosinski's fiction is Tarden in *Cockpit* (1975). Powerfully motivated to manage and dominate every relationship in which he finds himself, Tarden is

clearly the most controlling of the Kosinskian men. The brutalization to which he was subjected as a child empties him out emotionally and precludes him from ever interacting in a manner which would tend to build close associations with others. The way in which he lives—never leaving anything to chance—is related to his obsession with control. He dreams of a scripted reality in which uncertainty has been eliminated. As a former victim, he is determined never to relinquish authority over anything. His basic approach to life, motivated by deep-seated insecurities, is defensive in nature. Everything he does, from spying on his neighbors, to traveling about in disguise, to moving from place to place is all designed to mitigate his vulnerability to attack. Unfortunately, these sorts of compulsive behaviours tend to drive others away. This serves to intensify Tarden's sense of frustration. He becomes cynical about even the basic notion of healing, yet he cannot bring himself to stop trying. He wants to reengage, but sadly—because he is incapable of trust—he cannot.

After Tarden, there is George Levanter in *Blind Date* (1977). Early on, Levanter realizes that total control is an illusion. While his life has been damaged by the survival experience, he nevertheless wishes to try to reenter society. As a result, he tends to avoid the sorts of intimidation techniques that Tarden employs in *Cockpit*. Levanter resigns himself to the inevitability of his blind dates—Kosinski's term for the random events which profoundly affect one's life, but which are impossible to predict beforehand. Like a surfer, all Levanter may do is ride out the wave of chaos, trusting that his life experiences will provide him with the means to stay afloat. He has no real expectations. Nothing—including his own demise on a ski slope during a blizzard—is all that shocking to him. Unlike the other Kosinskian men, Levanter's interest in control does not grow into an unwholesome preoccupation. The protagonist goes through a process of opening up or acceptance. He enters into loving relationships (and takes care of his ailing wife), expresses sincere regret over his having previously victimized others, takes pleasure in bringing gratification to his

lover, engages in his own war against injustice and displays a humour and playfulness that bears no similarity to previous incarnations of the Kosinskian man.

Kosinski's last three protagonists, Fabian in *Passion Play* (1979), Patrick Domostroy in *Pinball* (1982) and Norbert Kosky in *The Hermit of 69th Street* (1988) complete the life cycle of the Kosinskian man. These final protagonists all begin life in Eastern Europe, but live out their old age in the West. Their diminishing skills are a continual source of frustration. No longer distinguished by their extraordinary talents, they struggle to accept the emptiness that seems to inevitably await them. The Kosinskian hero is undeniably in decline in these books. Starting with *Passion Play,* the protagonists seem in dire need of a rest. Fabian, for example, once considered a world-class polo player is past his prime and struggling to cope with his physical decline. As the book unfolds, it becomes obvious that this version of the Kosinskian man is devoid of the sort of ferocity and passion that distinguished his predecessors. He spends a great deal of the book worrying about a time, probably in the near future, when he may not be able to support himself.

In comparison with Fabian, Domostroy's situation could only be described as desperate. Though he was once a significant composer, he finds himself incapable of producing new recordings. As a result, Domostroy must accept whatever work comes his way—no matter how demeaning—in order to survive. Where Fabian was a man in decline, Domostroy is very nearly destitute. Abandoned by his friends, excoriated (and then forgotten) by critics, and dismissed as a has-been by the music industry, Domostroy is a pathetic figure. His total vulnerability is a new twist for the Kosinskian man. He is forced to sell out his own values and intellect, including working for Andrea Gwynplaine as a kind of cheap detective, in order to survive. The protagonist of *Hermit*, Norbert Kosky, is also waging a losing battle against time. Once seen as a gifted novelist, a scandal devastates his reputation. The Kosky that the reader sees in *Hermit* is a prurient, childish

man, clearly in denial about both his virility and his future as a writer. As if to complete the life cycle of this protagonist, Kosky is murdered in the final pages of *Hermit*.

For the purposes of this work, the seven aforementioned protagonists are the Kosinskian men. Kosinski's other two protagonists, Chance in *Being There* (1971) and Jonathan Whalen in *The Devil Tree* (1973) are more like long lost cousins of the Kosinskian protagonist. While they are not Eastern Europeans survivors, they nevertheless share certain elements in common with the other characters. In *Being There*, for example, Chance often engages in magical thinking to explain the world around him. Because his knowledge of the world comes from watching television, rather than engaging with others, there are considerable gaps in his understanding of the world. His ignorance of reproductive biology is but one example.

> In some of the TV series about doctors and hospitals and operations, Chance had often seen the mystery of birth depicted: the pain and agony of the mother, the joy of the father, the pink, wet body of the newborn infant. But he had never watched any show which explained why some women had babies and others did not. Once or twice Chance was tempted to ask Louise about it, but he decided against it. Instead, he watched TV, for a while, with closer attention. Eventually, he forgot about it. (BT, 64)

It is easy to see the parallel with the boy in *The Painted Bird*. Both these protagonists are accidentally launched into worlds that they do not understand (and do not belong) and must try to make sense of the baffling events taking place all around them. In addition, they are both abandoned, the boy by his parents and Chance by the death of the Old Man. At some basic level, they are both victims. The boy is victimized by the cruelty and intolerance of the peasants, while Chance is a victim of another type. Early on in *Being There*, the reader is informed that long ago, the Old Man had told Chance the reason that he could not expect much from life.

> While some could learn to read and write, Chance would never be able to manage this. Nor would he ever be able to understand much of what others were saying to him or around him. Chance was to work in the garden, where he would care for plants and grasses and trees which grew there peacefully. He would be as one of them: quiet, openhearted in the sunshine and heavy when it rained.
> (BT, 7)

Chance is like Adam in the Garden of Eden and the Old Man's words (very nearly a commandment to Chance on how to live), become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Chance's exposure to television—all flash and no substance—has robbed him of the capacity for critical thought. Indeed, early in the novel "the soft soil of his brain, the ground from which all his thoughts shot up" is said to be "ruined forever." (BT, 7) Though it is never made clear why this is so, the inference is that Chance's mind had been wrecked by a steady diet of network programming. The hours spent in front of the TV do not present Chance with a clear view—and thus appreciation—of the world around him.

On another level, *Being There* serves as an illustration of the degree to which identity is imposed by society. Despite being an illiterate gardener, Chance's appearances on television make people assume that he is more than he is. His simple platitudes about gardening take on an added significance because they are stated on television and are thus interpreted as being politically motivated and significant. Just as the least objectionable program tends to win its time slot, Chance's complete banality is mistaken for amiability. He becomes a mirror in which the other characters (as well as society at large) see whatever they wish. In the end, the reader is never told who Chance is, nor do the other characters unlock Chance's secret. This is important. The reason that Chance is considered for national office has to do with his lack of a past. His life is not like other men's, a quagmire of lost opportunities and bad choices. Rather, it is a blank page. (BT, 106) Chance's misperceived résumé—the basic joke that drives *Being There* forward—is

what makes him so appealing. No one really knows who he is, so no one can contradict the public perception of Chance as an astute political pundit.

Jonathan Whalen, the protagonist of *The Devil Tree*, is the opposite of Chance. His familial and personal ties place suffocating constraints on his life. He seeks to escape from his family's legacy, but he is not equal to the task. Instead, he becomes a fierce iconoclast, lashing out for no good reason and hurting others as a way of establishing power. Whalen is the prototype of the Kosinskian man who emerges in *Cockpit* and *Blind Date*. He wants to make his own way in the world, yet he feels a tremendous sense of impotence. His family's legacy is impossible to escape. Regardless of where Whalen ventures on his voyages of inner exploration, his roots pop up around him, enveloping him. Like the boy in *The Painted Bird*, Whalen desperately wants to discern a meaning in events. He needs to understand his own motivations, but he seems incapable of appreciating that he cannot accomplish this end without truly giving of himself and engaging with other people. Unfortunately, Whalen never learns to form stable attachments. His addiction to narcotics, together with his own poignant sense of self-loathing, are too powerful. All of his sporadic and ill-conceived attempts to reassert his authority come to nothing. His search for experience is thwarted by his own internal vacuity. Moreover, his tremendous wealth has the unwanted side-effect of alienating him from others: he can never be sure how anyone actually feels about him. (Kauffmann 1973, 43) Despite his money, Whalen remains an archetypal outsider, a virtual "exile in his own land." (Lupack 1984, 150) In the end, his father's legacy hangs like a miasma over his life, infecting and perverting his psyche.

In an ironic echo of his mother's life, Whalen turns to opiates to ease his own pain, but they only seem to intensify his feelings of inadequacy. After drying out in Munich, he returns to America to find that his self-destructive proclivities have intensified, honed to a

fine edge through a lifetime of self-centered overindulgence. Although he sometimes enjoys a measure of success in curbing his most savage urges, he remains a man capable of great malevolence and cruelty. Because of his relationship with his father, Whalen is consumed by the idea of domination (and its relationship to conformity). Robert Alter points out that *The Devil Tree* is a book about "the fantasy [or illusion] of power" and that a constant running through all of Kosinski's work is this notion of people in authority being "obscenely brutal." (Alter 1973, 2) In the context of this book, Whalen is a student of power and the complex relationships it often creates. When Whalen awakens one night to find his billionaire father beating and attempting to drown the helpless family pet, he feels shame and impotence. He knows that he is powerless to help the animal. Moreover, he will never understand with any certitude what motivates his father. Though his early life is nothing like the boy's in *The Painted Bird*, Whalen nevertheless shares the boy's unwillingness to trust. In addition, Whalen consciously rejects all authority. His godparents' murder is a case in point. He would have preferred to kill his biological parents, but they are already dead, so he kills the next best thing. Whalen has a ruthless single-mindedness that he shares with the Kosinskian protagonists who come after him. He is only able to communicate the depth of his own agony. His pain is too intense for him to think in terms of trying to overcome it or utilize it as a catalyst for change in his own life. In the end, he is confused by even the most basic of human urges. He has a difficult time associating intimacy with anything but repression and violence. This is another trait shared by all the Kosinskian men.

SECTION IV - INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

a) Overview

It is a perilous task to attempt to identify with certitude Jerzy Kosinski's primary influences in the production of his fiction. On account of the elusive quality of his writing, it is difficult to determine with precision who or what most impacted its creation. In addition, his interviews are not as much help as one might expect: he often makes statements in one interview, only to later contradict them in another. Finally, his influences were changing throughout his life, so those factors that impacted the creation of one book may have had little or no influence on the writing of another. With regard to his most important influences, all that can be undertaken here is a speculative analysis—an educated guess, as it were, based on a careful reading of his work. There are three areas that must be explored when conducting an inquiry into the origins of a writer's work. First, there is what the author himself said about his own work. Second, there are the references that he makes to other books, people and historical events within his own work. Finally, there is the matter of what his critics and biographers had to say about his life and work. After such an analysis of Kosinski's books, it is clear that his influences were eclectic. In no particular order, they included: 1) his father; 2) the fairy stories and fables of his youth; 3) his memories of life in Poland; 4) his friends and family; and 5) a series of diverse writers including Czeslaw Milosz, Tadeusz Borowski and Jakov Lind.

Finally, there is the matter of those individuals whom Kosinski himself mentions, but whose influence was tenuous, at least in terms of his fiction. Kosinski, it should never be forgotten, was a natural born spinmeister. He had his own agenda and wanted to carefully shape the manner in which he was perceived by readers and reviewed by critics. For

example, when he decided that it was time to re-embrace his Polish heritage, after the rise of the Solidarity Trade Union, Kosinski became a devotee of the works of Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel was interested in spirituality and the place of god in the life of average men and women. Heschel also felt that it would be counterproductive to the advancement of Jewish culture to dwell unnecessarily on the notion of the Holocaust as Judaism's defining event. Though Kosinski began introducing Heschel into virtually every interview he gave and even changed the epigraph of *The Devil Tree* (when he revised and expanded the book in 1981) from a quote from Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* to Abraham Joshua Heschel's *Who Is Man?* it is hard to see how Heschel impacted the content of Kosinski's work in any significant way. Instead, it seems more likely that Kosinski had been engaged in what Sloan describes as "the working out of personal issues in the context of a public debate." (Sloan 1996, 427)

Kosinski was political by nature: he tended to argue what was most expedient to his interests at a given moment, regardless of whether it contradicted his prior statements. Perhaps this is not all that surprising for a man who claimed that he found it beneficial to change "his friends every two years." (Sloan 1996, 342) Even prior to the scandal, Kosinski appears to have been concerned about how he would be remembered and whether his books would continue to be read. Around the time of *Hermit's* publication, Kosinski sought to initiate his own rehabilitation. By positioning himself beside different historical figures and writers, Kosinski seemed to believe that future readers might be persuaded to follow his (mis)direction. For example, critic Thomas Gladsky believes that Kosinski turned "to Joseph Conrad in self-defense." (Gladsky 1992, 175) Kosinski sought to play up the similarities in their lives, that they both started out in Poland, only to live abroad and write in English. In addition, Conrad (1857-1924) had many outspoken critics in his homeland.

In *Hermit*, Kosinski recounts that Polish novelist Eliza Orzeszkowa published an article in 1899 questioning Conrad's decision to write in English. (Hermit, 306) To Orzeszkowa and other Polish intellectuals, Conrad had willfully betrayed his Polish heritage. Kosinski characterizes Conrad as a "Polish literary renegade," a man not so unlike himself, who had selected the English language "to best express what was inexpressible in his Polish soul!" (Hermit, 306) In *Pinball*, Kosinski's references to Chopin appear to serve a similar purpose, to link his name with yet another famous émigré's. As will be shown, Kosinski employs Chopin as a trope for exile from Poland.

After studying his life, one cannot help but be struck by Kosinski's fragility. Even as he became accepted in New York literary society, he seemed to reserve judgement on whether he really belonged. As Jerome Klinkowitz makes clear in his article, "Betrayed by Jerzy Kosinski," Kosinski protected himself by creating levels of ambiguity, so that "the real Jerzy Kosinski was unknowable, inviolable, secure." (Klinkowitz 1985, 131) According to John Taylor, the choices that Kosinski made in his life, from surrounding himself with famous people to continually revising his life story, seemed to be a way of compensating for (what he perceived as) his own inadequacies. (Taylor 1991, 27) There is an underlying notion that Kosinski believed that if he ever allowed anyone to get really close to him, close enough to know him thoroughly, they might become jealous of his success or try to hurt him. His prime motivation throughout his life was a fear of rejection. As Kosinski himself was reported to have said to Geoffrey Stokes, co-author of the *Village Voice* article, "All my life I've been hiding." (Taylor 1991, 36) There is something here that resembles the boy in the first novel. As a result of his insecurities, Kosinski built a mythology around himself in which he tended to tell people either part of the truth or outright lies. The propensity to play with the truth, a characteristic probably picked up in childhood—when the revelation of his true ethnic background would have meant certain death—appears to be something Kosinski never outgrew.

According to Frederick Karl, in the period after the publication of *The Painted Bird* and *Steps*, Kosinski's fiction was increasingly dominated by his own self-concern, as he became "his [own] sole subject matter." (Karl 1983, 502) This brings up a vital question. Why was Kosinski so self-absorbed? What was he attempting to do? Kosinski's personal flamboyance in his public life, combined with his utilization of protagonists who resembled him, appears to be part of a carefully calculated attempt to make people take notice of his work, one way or the other. Oftentimes, Kosinski appears to be overcompensating, fighting against his own insecurity. Why else would he continually tell different stories about himself? Or continue to rework his novels until the last possible second? These do not seem like the actions of a man secure with himself. With Kosinski, it is always safest to approach his apparent acts of supreme self-confidence with skepticism. It is impossible to put this idea more eloquently than the Queen of Denmark in *Hamlet*, Act Three, Scene Two: "The lady doth protest too much methinks." (The Pelican Shakespeare 1957, 101)

According to his friend and confidante, Professor Musia Schwartz, Kosinski had never quite managed to find his true calling. Notwithstanding his one masterpiece, he remained, at heart, "just a social scientist reporting from hell."[6] In Dr. Schwartz's view, a novelist should demonstrate affection for his or her creations. Kosinski, however, did not appear to share this view. Whether emotionally or physically, from *The Painted Bird* onward, all his characters are made to suffer. Far from embracing them, a strong case could be made that Kosinski did not much care for any of his protagonists. Kosinski seems to have found it hard to identify with pleasure. His novels are never about a search for happiness. In his work, the battle has already been fought and lost. His protagonists are just hanging on, trying to survive the ride. Each of his major characters—including Chance and Jonathan Whalen—share this characteristic, men struggling to cope with what will happen

[6]Discussion with Musia Schwartz about the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, Montreal, 6 May 2002.

next. At certain points in Kosinski's work, the reader is put in mind of a scientist watching rats scampering through a maze.

During his time as a social scientist in Poland, Kosinski learned that repression was inherent in any social relationship. As an outsider seemingly wherever he went, Kosinski perceived groups as inherently threatening to the safety of the individual. Similarly, he had an instinctive distrust of authority. Living in Poland gave Kosinski the opportunity to study the Total State from the inside out. He found that in it, the individual was controlled and manipulated from birth to death. He also reached the conclusion that unless he actively sought to avoid becoming a victim, he would forever remain at the mercy of other people. Early in his life as a writer, Kosinski made a significant decision. Except for *The Painted Bird*, his protagonists would be solitary survivors taking control (or seeking to take control) of their destinies. The Kosinskian man quickly becomes a virtuoso in the art of manipulation. Under layers of false identity, he spends his life observing the world around him, seeking out ways of reengaging with others.

What is known definitively about Kosinski is that he was a voracious consumer of newspapers, magazines, texts and novels. His writing required that he become familiar with diverse areas of the human experience. He could discourse knowledgeably on topics such as popular culture, art, philosophy, film, politics and economics. According to those who knew him best, he possessed "an absolutely extraordinary mind," so much so that he might well have succeeded in any number of other areas, apart from writing.[7] He was also a talented photographer and a highly engaging university lecturer. Trained as an academic, Kosinski had no trouble communicating his ideas to others. In his academic work, and then his nonfiction books and finally his fiction, Kosinski conceived life as a struggle between the individual and the collective. Being involved in the world of ideas did not

[7]Discussion with Musia Schwartz about the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, Montreal, 6 May 2002.

seem to impede (and perhaps fed) his interest in practical matters such as the exercise of power. By socializing with movers and shakers, those who made decisions and shaped policy and opinion, Kosinski demonstrated an engagement with the wider world, outside the literary community.

The most serious of the charges that the *Village Voice* made against Kosinski in 1982 was that his work was not entirely his own. This is ironic because Kosinski was actually quite thorough in identifying his sources. His nonfiction pamphlets, articles, books and novels seem to overflow with citations. Kosinski's last book, *The Hermit of 69th Street*—which consists of almost nothing but sources (held together within a bare bones narrative structure)—is actually an exaggerated version of things Kosinski had been doing for years. His autofiction answers the question: who are his influences? Kosinski's training as an academic made him aware that every writer has intellectual precursors and that it is always easier and more effective (and far less dangerous) to quote another writer than to attempt to appropriate his work. Kosinski tended not to be shy about what he was currently reading and what was most important to him during a given period.

b) Father Knows Best

Probably the single most important person in the formation of the young Kosinski was his father, Moses. At times, Kosinski himself could not seem to decide how he felt about his father; their relationship appears to have been defined by its ambivalence. In interviews and articles, Kosinski never fails to express admiration for his father's intellect, especially in managing to survive the war, yet Kosinski also seems to harbour feelings of resentment. Though his son ignored him with a vengeance, Moses Kosinski nevertheless warned his son, in no uncertain terms, of the dangers inherent in living a public life.

Kosinski's description of his father's thoughts on the matter of fame leave no room for debate:

> To him the most rewarding life was one passed unnoticed by the world. He was convinced that the creative individual, whose art draws the world to him, pays for the success of his work with his own happiness and that of his loved ones. (PB Afterward, 268)

It could not have been easy for Kosinski, knowing how right his father had been. It appears that Moses Kosinski had a talent for laying out the main conflicts in life, as he saw them. And he turns out to have been right an extraordinary percentage of the time. The elder Kosinski was said to be a very opinionated man, with definitive views on nearly everything. As an example of his father's pragmatism, and to illustrate the kind of man he was, Kosinski recounted his father's belief "that the only person who made sense on a horse was Don Quixote, and that nothing was ever produced while sliding down a mountain or riding a horse." (Gefen 1991, 235) Like any rebellious son, this only served to wet Kosinski's appetite for these pastimes, and fueled his desire to write about both activities. During his lifetime, Moses Kosinski had a tremendous impact on his son's life, advising him to leave Poland in the 1950s, providing young Jerzy with provocative (and often banned) books, and once his son left for America, mailing off daily notes detailing "the finer points of English grammar and idiom." (PB Afterward, 268) While Kosinski clearly admired his father, he was often motivated to do the opposite of what he wished.

> My father's desire for anonymity was part of a lifelong attempt to construct his own philosophical system to which no one else would have access. I, for whom exclusion and anonymity had been a fact of daily life as a boy, conversely felt compelled to create a world of fiction to which all had access. (PB Afterward, 268)

One way or another, whether he was openly rebelling against him or praising the man's level-headedness and erudition, Kosinski's father had a profound influence on his son's life and work. After his death, Moses Kosinski seems to take on an even greater significance. Indeed, Kosinski's fiction is replete with characters resembling his father. They tend to be solid men of character who believe that they must remain strong for their families. It may be instructive to juxtapose a passage from Kosinski's Afterward to *The Painted Bird,* in which he marvels at his father's capacity to stay calm in the face of daunting odds, with another from a later novel:

> After my father's death, my mother gave me the hundreds of small notebooks that he had kept during the war. Even in flight, she said, never really believing that he would survive, my father somehow managed to make extensive notes on his studies of higher mathematics in a delicate, miniature script. He was primarily a philologist and classicist, but during the war only mathematics offered him relief from the quotidian reality. Only by enveloping himself in the realm of pure logic, abstracting himself from the world of letters with its implicit commentary on human affairs, could my father transcend the hideous events that surrounded him daily. (PB Afterward, 267)

The language that Kosinski selects for his description of Gerhard Osten, Goddard's father in *Pinball*, is remarkably similar:

> Being forced daily to seek new hiding places, having to pretend not to be Jewish, living among strangers, he must have been filled with an unending sense of terror. He had made extensive notes in a series of small notebooks during that time, notes about his life as well as about music, but not wanting to upset his son by passing on to him the story of the horror of his earlier life, Gerhard Osten had always kept these notebooks locked up. Only once had Jimmy been able to glance at them, and then he saw clearly that the notebooks had been his father's way of transcending the hideous events that surrounded him daily. (Pinball, 142)

After being ill for many years, Moses Kosinski died in 1962, some three years before the publication of *The Painted Bird.* It seems clear that Kosinski felt a strong bond with the man who had taught him so much. As a child, Kosinski had not always appreciated his father. Moses Kosinski was a reserved and thoughtful man, while his son took a more aggressive approach to life. The young Kosinski wanted to be noticed at all costs, while his father felt that his son's habitual attention seeking was counterproductive and undignified. According to Kosinski, his father "had consistently refused to speak in public, to lecture, to write books or articles, because he believed in the sanctity of privacy. To him the most rewarding life was one passed unnoticed by the world." (PB Afterward, 268) In the end, Kosinski could not live as his father suggested he should: unnoticed. Regardless of the risks, Kosinski had a nearly insatiable desire for recognition.

Once he left Poland, Kosinski's connection to his father only seemed to grow stronger. Kosinski liked to tell the story of how he and his father would deliberately converse in Latin during their transatlantic telephone calls in order to frustrate and anger the Polish censors. (Sloan 1996, 166) Kosinski loved the idea of snubbing the authorities in this manner. It was a way of mocking the ignorance and callousness of the apparatchiks who were so concerned about suppressing dissent that they were prepared to eavesdrop on a conversation between a parent and child. Speaking in exotic languages was a way of dissenting without actually doing anything overtly seditious. As was his wont, Kosinski embellished the details of his father's life. Moses Kosinski did have an abiding interest in and knowledge of romance languages, but he was never a professor of philology, as Kosinski had claimed. (Taylor 1991, 28) When discussing his father, Kosinski frequently resorted to exaggeration. Nevertheless, as one of his friends remarked, Kosinski's stories always tended to be "more true than not." (Taylor 1991 27) Compared to those around him in postwar Poland, Moses Kosinski was indeed well read and worldly. And it was because of him that young Jerzy was exposed to a variety of writers. (Leiderman 1987,

217-218) Even if some of Kosinski's stories about his father were exaggerations, it is clear that as a son, Kosinski was always listening to his father. Indeed, even while disregarding his advice, Kosinski remembered, often in precise detail, what the older man had said. Kosinski seems to have taken everything his father said very much to heart.

c) The Fictions of Childhood

When Kosinski was born in 1933, fables and fairy tales were still very much a part of childhood, perhaps as ubiquitous as *Sesame Street* and *Barney the Dinosaur* are today. At that time, virtually every child had listened to or read about Jack and the Beanstalk, Goldie Locks and the Three Bears, The Three Little Pigs and Watty Piper's *The Little Engine That Could* (1930). The fairy tales of Jacob and Wilheim Grimm (e.g. "Cinderella," "Rumpelstilzkin," "Sleeping Beauty," "Rapunzel" and "Little Snow White") and Hans Christian Andersen (e.g. "The Princess and the Pea," "The Little Mermaid" and "Thumbelina") were especially popular. In addition, Yiddish culture is replete with fables by writers such as Shalom Aleichem. Kosinski was aware of all these fairy tales and fables and was affected by them. In his *Notes of the Author*, Kosinski describes his first novel as being "fairy tales experienced by the child, rather than told to him." (Notes of the Author, 19) In one of the first reviews of *The Painted Bird*, Anne Haley describes Kosinski's novel as having echoes from Grimm's Fairy Tales and Chapbooks. (Halley 1965, 425) *The Painted Bird* has an unusual number of parallels to the story of *Hänsel and Gretel.* In this fairy tale, a poor couple, unable to support their two young children, decide that it is better to abandon them in the forest and save themselves, rather than risk starving to death. In the forest, Hänsel and Gretel, who are innocent and trusting, eventually come upon a house made of candy. The owner, an evil witch wishing to eat them, invites them inside. The next day the witch imprisons Hänsel, with the intention of fattening him up before consuming him. Gretel is forced to aid the witch in her nefarious

plan. It is only after pushing the witch into an oven and watching her burn to death, that Gretel is able to free Hänsel. The brother and sister then help themselves to the witch's jewels before returning home, to live happily ever after.

In *The Painted Bird*, the protagonist is a young boy who is sent to live in what his parents believe will be the safety of a peasant village. After the woman with whom he is boarding dies, he is thrust out into the world alone, to fend for himself. Though it was not his parents' intention, the boy nevertheless feels abandoned. Much of *The Painted Bird's* power derives from its universality. Virtually anyone can identify with the nightmare of being physically separated from their parents for the first time. And even if this separation is only temporary, it may feel like an eternity to a child.

> The monstrous idea that my parents were not here and would not be here passed through my mind. I sat down and began to cry again, calling for my father and mother and even nanny. (PB, 13)

The protagonist is so young that he does not realize what is happening, nor whether he will ever be reunited with his parents. He cannot begin to appreciate the peril in which he finds himself. When the reader first encounters him, the boy is just an ordinary, trusting child, an exemplar of the innocent victim. In his mind, there is no good reason for anyone, much less strangers, to wish him harm. Without so much as a name to identify him, he could be anyone. As in most fairy tales, the boy is forced into an unfamiliar, hostile environment and must struggle to survive his cruel masters. The first two women he encounters, Marta and then Olga the Wise One, seem like witches. (Lupack 1988, 85) In one of his encounters, with a carpenter, the boy survives by pushing the carpenter into a bunker full of rats. The rats proceed to eat the man alive. This scene is as horrifying as Gretel's incineration of the witch.

The other fairy story which seems to have influenced *The Painted Bird* is Hans Christian Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling." In this tale, a swan egg is somehow placed into a duck's nest. The other ducks do not understand what has happened. The other animals continually rebuff the ugly ducking.

> The poor little duckling did not know where to turn. How he grieved over his own ugliness, and how sad he was! The poor creature was mocked and laughed at by the whole henyard. (Andersen, 1974, 219)

The protagonist of *The Painted Bird* finds himself in a similar plight. No matter how hard he tries to fit in, the peasants will not accept him: he is too different. Like the duckling of Andersen's story, the boy comes to accept the verdict of the peasants, as though he deserves their scorn:

> Some of the boys said occasionally that I should be delivered to the German headquarters, or that the soldiers should be told about the Gypsy bastard in the village. Women avoided me on the road, carefully covering the heads of their children. The men looked me over in silence, and casually spat in my direction. (PB, 84-85)

One of the farmers with whom the boy boards orders him to entertain at local celebrations. The boy's choice of material is revealing:

> They were entirely convulsed by the fables and rhymed stories about animals. Listening to stories about a goat traveling across the world in search of the capital of goatland, about a cat in seven-league boots, the bull Ferdinand, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Mickey Mouse, and Pinocchio, the guests laughed, choking on their food and sputtering vodka. (PB, 85-86)

Despite everything he has lived through, the boy still remembers his earliest experiences. These fables and fairy tales are a last link to childhood, a remnant of a time before the war, before he was separated from his parents and before he came to live among the cruel peasants.

Some of Kosinski's other work also seems to have been informed by the stories of his youth. Published six years after *The Painted Bird*, *Being There* functions as a sort of "contemporary fairy tale." (Everman 1991, 57) In it, Chance, an illiterate gardener, mistakenly rises to the heights of power after a series of people, including the President of the United States, misinterpret his platitudes as meaningful reflections on the state of the economy. Chance somehow manages to always be at the right place at the right time. In this way, he is the opposite of the boy in *The Painted Bird.* Chance fits in everywhere and is accepted by everyone. Chance's vacuity functions almost like magic: people instinctively fill in the gaps in his personality with their own. *Being There* functions as a cautionary tale. No one really knows what is going on (if anything) inside another person's mind. Indeed, as if to demonstrate the allegorical nature of his 1971 novel, Kosinski includes a reference to the fables of Ivan Andreevich Krylov (1768-1844).[8]

Clearly the classic stories of Kosinski's youth remained with him throughout his life. In its way, *Being There* resembles Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes." Chance is intellectually, emotionally and sexually barren, but everyone is incapable of seeing this. Only the reader, like the child in Andersen's fable, knows Chance's secret. Other vignettes in Kosinski's work which function as modern fables include: the episode with Nameless in *Blind Date* (Levanter's lack of confidence in himself leads him to assault a girl for whom he later comes to have feelings: this is a sort of

[8]Krylov's work borrowed heavily from the Aesop's Fables (e.g. "The Fox and the Bunch of Grapes" and "The Tortoise and the Hare").

reverse version of O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi") and the tale of Laba and Labina in *The Painted Bird* (an inverted variant of "The Emperor's New Clothes," in which Laba becomes so identified with his splendid outfits that after they are stolen, he hangs himself with the only clothing the thieves leave behind: a necktie).

d) The Ruthenian Connection

Ultimately, the single most important influence on Kosinski's work may have been his complex relationship with his homeland. Dr. Schwartz reports that in the early 1970s, Kosinski was adamant about never returning there. "I wouldn't go back there if it was in New Jersey," she recounts him as having stated.[9] Kosinski expressed a similar sentiment in his Afterward to *The Painted Bird* when he wrote, "I was determined never again to set foot in the country where I had spent the war years. That I had survived was due solely to chance, and I had always been acutely aware that hundreds of thousands of other children had been condemned." (PB Afterward, 255)[10] After the end of the Cold War, however, Kosinski decided to reengage with Poland, visiting a number of times. Regardless of his evolving position on the virtues of the Polish nation, it cannot be denied that he had many Polish friends in America and throughout the world and that the experience of having grown up there had a great influence on his life and his fiction. In *Hermit*, it becomes clear that Polish writers such as Czeslaw Milosz, Tadeusz Borowski and Joseph Conrad had an impact on Kosinski. He saw himself as following in the footsteps of these intellectuals who had come before him. In that sense at least, Kosinski himself was a member of what Gladsky referred to as the "family of twentieth-century Slavic writers." (Gladsky 1992, 163) As if to reaffirm his reconnection to Poland,

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[9]Discussion with Musia Schwartz about the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, Montreal, 21 May 2002.

[10]*The Painted Bird* was almost certainly influenced by Kosinski's knowledge of a nonfiction text of Holocaust testimony entitled *Polish Children Accuse*, by Unuk and Rodomska-Strzemecka. (Sloan 1994, 50)

Kosinski was dating a Polish jazz singer, Urszula Dudziak (who was also the last person to see him alive), at the time of his suicide. (Sloan, 1996, 428) His early life in Poland, one way or another, set the course of his life. Interestingly, his friend Dr. Schwartz rejects an interpretation of Kosinski's work as 'the writer in exile.' According to Schwartz, "Kosinski was born in exile; in essence, he was never at home anywhere."[11]

Kosinski may have been conflicted about his homeland, but he nevertheless delighted in dropping hints, as to his own background, throughout his fiction. Thomas Gladsky terms this "Kosinski's hide-and-tell method of giving partial information about Poland to a reader who must then identify the specifics for himself." (Gladsky 1992, 168) In his novels, the Kosinskian protagonists frequently trace their origins back to Ruthenia (a one-time province of Poland, now part of the western Ukraine). Kosinski seems to prefer to define himself by this very specific term—Ruthenian—rather than the more generic Polish. Most of his protagonists (e.g. Tarden in *Cockpit*) appear to be of Ruthenian extraction, but even those who are not (e.g. Levanter in *Blind Date*) turn out to be Slavs of one sort or another. Gladsky argues that Kosinski's fiction grows out of his ambivalent relationship to his homeland. Knowing this offers the reader a way of understanding what Gladsky calls "Kosinski's growth as a "nonethnic" ethnic writer and his unique version of the Polish self." (Gladsky 1992, 165)

In America, isolated from the country of his birth for so long, Kosinski had no choice but to "draw upon the Polish literary-cultural tradition" in creating his fiction. (Gladsky 1992, 176) Kosinski's protagonists are in a similar position: they tend to be men without connections to anything or anyone, who exist outside established systems. It is true that they resent being categorized in any way, yet there is a longing within them. They wish to understand what has happened to them and where they come from. The circumstances

[11] Discussion with Musia Schwartz about the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, Montreal, 21 May 2002.

of the war and their decision to live abroad only seems to enhance their curiosity and anxiety about their roots, both familial and national. These child survivors pass through stages (or as Kosinski termed it in his second novel, steps) in their attempts to adjust to their new lives. Yet their origins cannot be denied or forgotten. Even as they go about their new lives, they are still struggling to reconcile themselves to the events that they have lived through. As Gladsky puts it:

> Poland is a state of mind, and ethnicity is a complex metaphor that includes socialist intimidation, war, the Holocaust, and exile, the cruelties of history, the problematics of a thousand years of shared Christian and Jewish community, and the personal vicissitudes of art, immigration, and cultural displacement.
> (Gladsky 1992, 176)

Toward the end of Kosinski's life, around the time of the publication of *Pinball* and *Hermit*, his Ruthenian heritage seems to be very much on his mind. For example, in *Pinball*, Domostroy helps his lover, Donna Downes, to prepare for a Chopin competition in Warsaw. Kosinski's reference to Chopin functions as "a bridge back" to his homeland. (Gladsky 1992, 172) There are minor similarities between his life and famous Polish composer's. Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin (1810-1849) spent his early life in Poland, but after departing in his twenties, lived as an émigré in Paris until his death. In *Pinball*, Domostroy compliments Donna's playing by telling her that she successfully evokes Chopin's sense of Zal, a Polish word that Kosinski defines as "spiritual enigma—pain and rage smothered by melancholy—an emotional trademark of Poles, or any people oppressed for long periods of time." (Pinball, 109) It is possible that Kosinski saw himself in this way, as being eternally disconsolate, separate from, but at the same time linked to, a faraway place. The Ruthenian connection is key here: he somehow needed to connect with his homeland, to heal the wounds of childhood. But he must have known

that even if he did get this opportunity, which he did at the end of the Cold War, these sorts of wounds, inflicted so early in life, never really go away.

This anguish seems to have played a significant role in the creation of Kosinski's fiction, especially with regard to the type of characters that he chose to write about. Indeed, all the Kosinskian men seem to ooze Zal. After his departure from Poland in 1957, Kosinski burned so many bridges to his homeland with *The Painted Bird* (and the two Novak books before it) that he may have been convinced that it was foolhardy to even try to renew his association with the land of his birth. *Hermit* is a defiant text. Unlike much of his early work, this last book leaves no room for doubt about his ethnic identity. His Ruthenian bona fides are on prominent display throughout the work. Every few pages, Kosinski extols the virtues of Polish literature and culture. For example, Ruthenian peasants are presented as heroes for saving "thousands upon thousands of Jews." (Hermit, 46) And in another passage, Kosinski informs his readers that "Jews lived in Polish Ruthenia longer than anywhere else except ancient Israel." (Hermit, 46) In the end, Kosinski embraced his heritage. And he would surely not have taken offense to being included on a list of significant Slavic writers.

Because of what he witnessed in Poland, Kosinski tended to see the world in terms of victims and victimizers. Death was all around him. Throughout his life, the horror, terror and paranoia that he experienced as a child were to remain his close companions. In the end, Kosinski had as much trouble trusting others as he did loving them. Even the sexual relationships about which he writes are uniformly mechanical affairs. There is a conspicuous absence of either love or eroticism in his work. Kosinski instinctively gravitates towards pain and suffering, sadomasochism and humiliation being two topics that he returns to over and over. Something about his survival experience deeply influenced the sort of writer he eventually became. His childhood experiences intensified

the sadistic part of his imagination, and he realized that this would always separate him from others. Kosinski felt a strong need to shield himself from those who might otherwise act against his interests. In one way or another, the memory of having been a survivor child in hiding influenced the rest of Kosinski's life. His irrepressible urge to hide and observe what others were doing seemed to grow out of this experience. To him, identity was now something malleable, to be reinvented whenever he saw fit. Deception was also a part of this process, a bulwark against potential enemies. Misleading others by manipulating his appearance grew into a lifelong obsession.

e) Friends and Relations

In reading film director Roman Polanski's autobiography, the reader immediately notes that his story of spending the war years separated from his parents, surrounded by strangers, bears a startling resemblance to the boy's story in *The Painted Bird.* The young Polanski was thrown into a pond by village bullies, spent a night in the bed of an independent older woman (somewhat reminiscent of Stupid Ludmila), was eventually liberated by the Red Army and after the war, joined a gang of hooligans. Polanski even had a friend not so unlike the Silent One. After the war, Polanski was reunited with his father and sister who had miraculously managed to survive the war. Since Kosinski and Polanski were friends while at university in Lódz, it is logical to assume that some of the things which Polanski told him probably found their way, perhaps inadvertently, into Kosinski's first novel. According to James Park Sloan, "Polanski had told stories of his life alone on the run in Cracow, as a Jewish child during the occupation; sometimes listeners to Kosinski's stories got the impression he, too, had been in Cracow." (Sloan 1996, 190-191)

In addition, Polanski's characterization of life in Poland after the war, under State Socialism, bears a striking similarity to Kosinski's own descriptions of Eastern Europe—as drab and doctrinaire—in his two nonfiction books, as well as his second novel, *Steps*. These two men, who needed to leave Poland in order to realize their dreams, shared several interests. For example, both were talented photographers who specialized in the female nude. Their respective work, Polanski's movies and Kosinski's books, explore a number of significant themes, including the Holocaust and the nature of obsession. And like Kosinski, Polanski's characters are men and woman struggling to remain in control of their lives. Neither Polanski nor Kosinski shied away from deviance or ugliness. On the contrary, they were fascinated by it and it seems to have inspired their work. The opening line of Polanski's autobiography could just as well have been written by Kosinski, in the unlikely event that he had ever been moved to produce such a work:

> For as far back as I can remember, the line between fantasy and reality has been hopelessly blurred. (Polanski 1984, 9)

Indeed, these two men lived lives that could only be described as highly unusual. Both were driven to succeed and become respected members of their communities. Tragically, they both were undone by their personal weaknesses.

Kosinski's own experiences, his own individual traumas, the suffering that he was forced to undergo (especially in regard to his solitary childhood) were his primary influences. Yet, he was also influenced by those with whom he interacted. Again, it is impossible to say to what degree, but it is clear that at various moments in his life, the intercession of other people greatly influenced the way in which he thought about the world. His marriage to Mary Weir was vital to his development as a writer. Kosinski claimed that he wrote *The Painted Bird*, at least in part, because he wanted his wife to understand what he had lived through during the war. The life of luxury and privilege to which he was

exposed during his time with Mary Weir eventually became the basis of at least two of his novels: *Being There* and *The Devil Tree.* Benjamin and Elizabeth Eve Rand and the Whalen family bear more than a passing resemblance to the Weirs. In addition, the character of Mary Jane Kirkland in *Blind Date* seems to draw heavily on Mary Weir's life story.

Kosinski's work was also influenced by his relationships with his contemporaries in the New York literary community. Among these luminaries were William Styron and Norman Mailer. Though no direct links can be convincingly established between these authors and Kosinski's fiction, they are nevertheless significant contributors to Kosinski's career. Styron was well connected when Kosinski first encountered him. This relationship allowed Kosinski to come into contact with many important individuals. By watching Mailer's talk show appearances, Kosinski learned all he needed to know about promotion and even more important, self-promotion. Kosinski also had a number of relationships with significant musicians, artists, entertainers, businessmen, religious leaders and politicians. At one point or another, men such as Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jacob Javits, Johnny Carson, Warren Beatty, George Harrision, Peter Sellers and Mike Wallace were all part of Kosinski's circle. Indeed, in one form or another, characters based on these men recur throughout Kosinski's fiction. Perhaps the most important of these friendships was his relationship with Jacques Monod.

Seven years before their first meeting, Monod had won a Nobel Prize for his work as a molecular biologist. In 1971, Monod published an influential book entitled *Chance and Necessity*. Monod's argument, that evolution occurs through an entirely random series of mutations, was the starting point for Kosinski's sixth novel, *Blind Date*. As if to leave no doubt on this point, Kosinski includes Monod as a character in his novel. According to Welsh Everman, *Chance and Necessity* attempted to "apply the implications of

contemporary discoveries in biochemistry to the human cultural world." (Everman 1991, 106) *Blind Date* continues this process, exposing Monod's concepts to an even wider audience. In *Chance and Necessity*, Monod reasons "that there is no plan in nature" and "that destiny is written concurrently with each event in life, not prior to it." (Cahill [1] 1978, 135) This notion, of destiny as crisis management, meshed so perfectly with Kosinski's own emerging realization—of total control as a practical impossibility—that a novel based on the idea of life as a series of blind dates with destiny seemed almost inescapable (or perhaps, somewhat ironically, predestined). Though Monod had been deceased for some two years prior to *Blind Date's* publication, Kosinski resurrected his brilliant and stoic friend in order to allow him to speak for himself and explain the significance of his own ideas.

f) Other Influences

In a 1982 interview with Barbara Leaming, Kosinski characterized his experiences in Eastern Europe, after the war, as being every bit as dehumanizing (and perhaps worse in some ways) as those he endured during it. (Leaming 1982, 206-207) Considering what he may have lived through, and his horrifying depictions of that world in his first novel, this is a remarkable statement. This universe of paranoia and fear is born anew within each of Kosinski's books. Indeed, Czeslaw Milosz's 1953 book, *The Captive Mind*, is a virtual blueprint for Kosinski's Total State. Under The New Faith, Milosz's term for Soviet style totalitarian government, man is nothing, little more than an "instrument in an orchestra directed by the muse of History." (Milosz 1953, 11) Inside their captive minds, those living in the People's Democracies of Eastern Europe learn not to stand out or be noticed. In this culture of monolithic uniformity, mediocrity is actually rewarded. People aspire only to be an "average type." (Milosz 1953, 66) Like Milosz, Kosinski perceives collective societies as inherently threatening to the individual. Kosinski's characters

simply do not know how to blend in: they invariably stand out because their talents, intellect and resourcefulness make it impossible for them not to excel. They refuse to live according to any system, economic, ideological or otherwise. They typically see the Total State as "a vicious enemy" which must be evaded. (Cockpit, 17)[12] Like a character in *The Captive Mind* who likens her plight to being an "eternal slave," (Milosz 1951, 232) the protagonist of *Cockpit* vows to escape his homeland or die trying. In the end, he creates his own way out, turning the machinery of the Total State back on itself.

Another writer with whom Kosinski was familiar was fellow Pole Tadeusz Borowski (1922-1951). Borowski was also a survivor, who eventually took his own life; however, unlike Kosinski, Borowski had been a young adult during the war. A non-Jew, Borowski was sent to Auschwitz in 1943 for political crimes. His survival, as well as man's capacity for inhumanity to his fellows, are the subject matter of his seminal collection of short fiction, *This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. In this work, Borowski displays an indifference to his subject matter, dispassionately describing horrific events taking place directly in front of him, yet not fully registering their horror. In the title story of *This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, the narrator, Vorarbeiter Tadeusz, describes his job, tidying up a boxcar after it has disgorged its human cargo:

> We climb inside. In the corners amid human excrement and abandoned wrist-watches lie squashed, trampled infants, naked little monsters with enormous heads and bloated bellies. We carry them out like chickens, holding several in each hand. (Borowski 1959, 39)

[12]It should be noted that Kosinski was a great admirer of Arthur Koestler. The atmosphere of paranoia with which Kosinski characterizes life under State Socialism bears a close resemblance to Arthur Koestler's descriptions in *Darkness at Noon* (1940). Koestler describes a world in which there is no "private sphere, not even inside a man's skull." (Koestler 1940, 83) It is this dawning realization that prompts Tarden to attempt his escape.

The detachment of the narrator, his matter of fact way of describing the horrors he is witnessing, without any embellishment, is particularly striking. Regardless of how many times Borowski employs it, this technique remains stunningly effective. Such unobtrusive passages have an unusual power:

> Several other men are carrying a small girl with only one leg. They hold her by the arms and the one leg. Tears are running down her face and she whispers faintly: 'Sir, it hurts, it hurts...' They throw her on the truck on top of the corpses. She will burn alive along with them.
> (Borowski 1959, 46)

Kosinski's writing displays a similar detachment from its subject matter. In *The Painted Bird*, the section describing the arrival of the brutal, nearly animalistic Kalmuks is distinguished by its lack of passion. It is simply reported to the reader, without any editorializing:

> Drunken Kalmuks handed women spattered with blood from one to another, beating them, forcing them to perform odd acts. One of them rushed into a house and brought out a small girl of about five. He lifted her high so that his comrades could see her well. He tore off the child's dress. He kicked her in the belly while her mother crawled in the dust begging for mercy. He slowly unbuttoned and took down his trousers, while still holding the little girl above his waist with one hand. Then he crouched and pierced the screaming child with a sudden thrust. When the girl grew limp he threw her away into the bushes and turned to the mother. (PB, 189)

It could be argued that the detachment with which Kosinski, like Borowski, tells his story, serves as a front. One of Borowski's critics, Piotr Kuhiwczak points to his aloofness as a "mask behind which he attempts to hide his guilt, anxiety, and inability to make sense of his painful experience." (Kuhiwczak 1992, 402) The calm of the respective

narrators functions as a substitute for their emotions. In Kosinski's work, the coolness of his protagonists, their incapacity to relate to anyone other than themselves, is part of a complex process of adjustment. The experience of having survived the war has made it difficult for them to connect to others. Rather than true detachment, the Kosinskian man behaves as he does because he is terrified. He simply cannot bring himself to trust or openly engage with those around him. Kosinski's protagonists will not permit themselves any degree of vulnerability. Having been victims once, and determined never to be so again, they focus on control to the exclusion of everything else. This is a way of tuning out or disengaging from others.

In Milosz's *The Captive Mind*, there is a chapter on "Beta, The Disappointed Lover," in which the life and death of Borowski are discussed. According to Milosz, Borowski's uniqueness as a writer lay in his fearless confrontation of the facts of his own survival. He wrote about the world he knew, what some scholars have called "l'univers concentrationnaire." (Langer 1975, 91) Borowski's fictional world is a place without hope, where a man might be killed at any second for the slightest infraction. In the camp, the best case scenario is survival in the very short term. The prisoners are aware that for them, there is no future. In Borowski's stories, his protagonists survive because they work the system. In "This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen," Vorabeiter Tadeusz is privileged—at least comparatively—first, because he is a non-Jew and second, because he is part of a labour gang that unloads incoming transports. Those in the so-called 'Canada' group are permitted to keep some of the food and clothing that they unload for themselves. As Borowski remarks, "for several days the entire camp will live off this transport." (Borowski 1959, 49) In this story, "humans are reduced to predatory animals." (Schwarz 1999, 132) To ensure their survival, the labour gang becomes complicit in the machinery of genocide. As Milosz says of Borowski, he ended up seeing

"the world as a place in which nothing existed outside of naked force." (Milosz 1951, 113)

The same could easily be said of Kosinski's own vision as expatiated in his fiction and acted out through his Kosinskian men. What unites Borowski and Kosinski are their origins and their reactions to the events they witnessed during and after World War II.[13] Milosz talks of Borowski's "keen eye" for detecting "all that was absurd, infamous, and vile" in the world around him." (Milosz 1951, 124) Kosinski possessed a similar gift for detecting weaknesses and hypocrisy, but he employed his critical faculties to a different end than Borowski. Borowski became a disappointed lover because he stayed behind in Poland and was eventually absorbed into The New Faith. The implication is that his talent as a writer and critic was wasted. Borowski committed suicide when he realized that he had become an ideological tool. Kosinski, aware of the role that a writer under socialist realism was expected to play, escaped to the west and instead wrote of the dangers posed to the individual by authoritarian political structures. In his work, Kosinski leaves no doubt as to the paralyzing effects of State Socialism on every aspect of the creative process.

Kosinski's fiction is oftentimes compared with the work of Austrian author Jakov Lind. Lind was very much Kosinski's contemporary as well as his friend. Both had survived the war while still relatively young people (Kosinski as an adolescent and Lind as a young man) and their writing reflects this experience. Lind's collection of short fiction, *Soul of*

[13]Indeed, even their descriptions of their Nazi tormentors are similar. In *The Painted Bird*, the boy is fixated by an SS officer with whom he comes in contact. He is clearly in awe of this man, whose shining jackboots, freshly pressed breeches and glittering death's-head insignia simultaneously inspire and terrify him. In comparison with the officer, the boy feels like a "squashed caterpillar oozing in the dust." (PB, 119) In "This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen," Vorarbeiter Tadeusz describes feeling equally insignificant in comparison with the Nazi officers who oversee the arrival of the transports: "Motor cycles drive up, delivering S.S. officers, bemedalled, glittering with brass, beefy men with highly polished boots and shiny, brutal faces." (Borowski 1959, 35) Vorarbeiter Tadeusz immediately recognizes his own unimportance. All he can hope for is his own survival, by working hard and remaining inconspicuous.

Wood, presents a chilling vision of the world. Lawrence Langer characterizes Lind as having been "simultaneously imprisoned and inspired by the Holocaust." (Langer 1975, 246) The first line of Lind's short story "Soul of Wood," alerts the reader that he is entering an unfamiliar place: "Those who had no papers entitling them to live lined up to die." (Lind 1962, 9) Lind's fiction has a foreboding, sterile atmosphere, somewhat reminiscent of Franz Kafka's work. Even when Lind's characters somehow manage to survive their ordeals (as in the terrifying story, "Journey through the Night") the reader is left with the impression that the fight was somehow not worth it. As the cannibal mockingly says to the protagonist of the aforementioned story, after the man stops the train in which they are riding, "See, he shouted, you've made an ass of yourself for life. Look who wants to live." (Lind 1962, 104)

Kosinski's work has a similar quality. His protagonists are men trying to come to terms with what has happened to them. In *Cockpit*, Tarden's focus on survival has a feeling of pointlessness, perhaps most of all to himself. Despite knowing that total control will never bring him contentment, he pursues it anyway. In the end it is all he has. He does not know what else to do. Why is he so fixated with control? Beyond mere survival, what does a character like Tarden do with his life? After his wartime childhood, he spends his adulthood spying on, harassing and manipulating others. In the end, he cannot relate or truly engage, so his survival is a lost opportunity. Lind's work has a similar bleakness, as he shows men living or hiding in cold, black places. To borrow the title of one of Borowski's short stories, this truly is a "world of stone." In Lind's story, "Resurrection," two Jews take refuge together in a tiny cellar in Amsterdam. The story is not horrifying in and of itself: it is merely a tale of two men hiding together. Nevertheless, it is the reader's knowledge of what is going on outside, around the men, that creates an atmosphere of fear. The two men, Weintraub and Goldschmied, are like two hunted animals. They cannot hope to survive the war, only to remain hiding awhile, until they are discovered.

When they are eventually arrested, there is a palpable sense of relief. They no longer need to live in fear. Their ultimate fate—deportation and execution—is now a foregone conclusion.

Lind's work is devoid of love, light and hope. His characters must struggle to survive, but their enemy is always something amorphous: it is as though the whole landscape of Lind's fiction is attempting to swallow the protagonists whole. According to Lawrence Langer, "the Holocaust has created its own mushroom cloud, and it hovers over his [Lind's] artistic horizon as permanent witness to the metamorphosis history has wrought on the materials of imaginative fiction." (Langer 1975, 239) For both Lind and Kosinski, the shadow of the Holocaust is a long one. In one way or another, it affected the writing of practically everything else they published, including Kosinski's final autofiction and Lind's autobiography, *Counting My Steps* (1969). According to critic Andrea Hammel, Lind's autobiography is a "subversion of the Bildungsroman." (Hammel 2001, 191) The survival experience changes everything: a stable identity cannot emerge. Instead, what comes across is "the author's total lack of faith in man's humanity." (Rosenfeld 2001, 11) This is at least as true of Kosinski as it is of Lind.

Where Kosinski's work most resembles Lind's is in the things they choose to write about. Both create protagonists who want to make sense of the chaos around them. And both authors are interested in the notion of malformation, both physical and emotional. The protagonist of "Soul of Wood," for example, is "an anatomical miracle, a head without a body." (Strickhausen 2001, 68) Only later does the protagonist, Anton Barth, grow limbs, but he remains paralyzed and mute. In *Blind Date*, Levanter encounters a similar character, a grown woman with the deformed body of an infant. And muteness comes up a number of times in Kosinski's novels, starting with the boy's loss of voice in *The Painted Bird.* It seems as though both Lind and Kosinski see the post-Holocaust world

itself as being deformed in some way. The lack of language is a trope for the incapacity of the protagonists to make sense of what they have lived through.

There are a number of other authors whose work may have had an influence on Kosinski. Albeit with unseemly brevity, the impact of three should at least be mentioned here: Albert Camus, Edgar Allan Poe and Bruno Schulz.

Kosinski had great admiration for the work of Albert Camus (1913-1960), partly because Camus had been a close associate of Jacques Monod's in the French resistance during World War II. (Sloan 1996, 309) Kosinski's affinity for Camus possibly derived from the sort of heroes he created: men living within their own moral universe. Similarities have been noted between the protagonist of *L'Etranger* (*The Outsider*) and certain of Kosinski's protagonists. According to critics William Kennedy and Krystyna Prendowska, Camus is one of Kosinski's "literary antecedents." (Kennedy 1993, 135 and Prendowska 1978, 11) And John W. Aldridge pronounced Camus to be among Kosinski's "greatest teachers." (Aldridge 1971, 26) Kosinski's nonfiction articles (e.g. *Notes of the Author* and *The Art of the Self*) are liberally sprinkled with references to Camus. In *L'Etranger*, Meursault is largely indifferent to the world around him. His detachment from everyone, including the young woman who loves him, is reminiscent of the nameless protagonist of *Steps*, who cannot bring himself to trust anyone. Critic Krystyna Prendowska argues that Meursault's emotional coolness amounts to "a form of metaphysical revolt." (Prendowska 1980, 12) Like the nameless protagonist of *Steps*, Meursault appears to be going through the motions of life.

Another possible influence on Kosinski was Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). In "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Pit and the Pendulum," Poe creates a suffocating, claustrophobic atmosphere. In one story, "The Black Cat," a man murders his wife and encases her body

in the wall of their cellar. By accident, he seals the family pet in with his wife's body and is undone when the animal begins shrieking while the police are still in his home. In another story, "The Cask of Amontillado," one man entombs another alive. There are many scenes of entrapment and revenge in *The Painted Bird*, *Steps* and *Cockpit* that arguably owe their genesis to Poe's stories.

The Polish writer and artist, Bruno Schulz (1892-1942), became a favourite of Kosinski's near the end of his life. The Gestapo murdered Schulz in 1942, but his graphic art and his stories survived the war. In his two collections, *Cinnamon Shops* (1934) and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (1937), Schulz creates "claustrophobic fantasies about idiosyncratic, obsessive figures." (Schwarz 1999, 320) According to Daniel Schwarz, "given his strange, discontinuous images, his encyclopedic pastiches, his meditative riffs, his absence of a traditional plot, characters, or dramatized narrator, Schulz more than our other writers belongs to postmodernism." (Schwarz 1999, 330) Judging from the frequency with which Schultz is quoted, it is plausible that Kosinski's *Hermit,* a book with uncertain settings, impossible situations and bizarre digressions, was influenced by Schultz's unconventional style of writing.

SECTION V - SELECTED LITERATURE REVIEW

In the production of this work, there were a number of critics and journalists whose insights were indispensable. Between 1981 and 1991, a series of five monographs appeared which became an efficacious starting point for the type of discussion herein undertaken. The first book, by Paul R. Bruss, was entitled *Victims: Textual Strategies in Recent American Fiction* (1981). This book included three case studies, Kosinski's work being but one. The other authors under discussion were Vladimir Nabokov and Donald Barthelme. Bruss' text identified the primary themes in Kosinski's fiction, up to and

including *Blind Date*. The next book, appearing in 1982, was Norman Lavers' *Jerzy Kosinski*. This volume emphasized Kosinski's biography, but also took time to examine the major themes of each of his novels. Lavers' book also includes a short chapter on Kosinski's two non-fiction texts. More importantly, Lavers was among the first critics to suggest a link between Kosinski's first two novels, arguing that "some of the episodes in *Steps*" may have originally been "written for *The Painted Bird* and later left out." (Lavers 1982, 60) Unfortunately, Lavers allowed Kosinski to "line edit the actual text" so that his book becomes what James Park Sloan described as "an irrefutable record of Kosinski's reinvention of himself." (Lupack 1998, 23) Clearly Lavers' book suffers from his decision to allow Kosinski to manage its contents. Although it still provides perspective on Kosinski's oeuvre, the book lacks credibility on the matter of Kosinski's personal history. By 1988, two new texts had appeared, Paul R. Lilly's *Words in Search of Victims: The Achievement of Jerzy Kosinski* and Barbara Tepa Lupack's *Plays of Passion, Games of Chance: Jerzy Kosinski and His Fiction*. Both books provide useful insights into Kosinski's fiction, especially Lupack's, which includes a brief discussion of Kosinski's last book, *The Hermit of 69th Street*. In 1991, Welsh D. Everman's *Jerzy Kosinski: The Literature of Violation* was published. This text contains many original insights into Kosinski's work, though it seems incomplete since it inexplicably fails to discuss Kosinski last book, *Hermit*, published some three years previously. Nevertheless, the book does enhance the reader's understanding of the first eight novels. Everman was also important because his book tended to support the viewpoint that all of the Kosinskian men are related to each other:

> With the exception of Chance in *Being There* (and he is a notable exception), Kosinski's protagonists share the same obsessions and desires. All alike are outsiders, aliens in one way or another, and all are not coherent selves but broken fragments of selves. (Everman 1991, 23)

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In the production of this work, there was one small bit of luck that made all the difference. Some time before the writing began in earnest, James Park Sloan's definitive biography of Kosinski, entitled *Jerzy Kosinski: A Biography*, was published. Sloan's 1996 book was important insofar as it pinned down important dates and relevant names. This sort of work, untouched by Kosinski himself (unlike Lavers' book), had not previously existed. In general, Sloan provided an extensive and accurate chronology of Kosinski's life. It did not provide too much insight into the meaning of Kosinski's novels, but this is not the point in writing such a biography. The main weakness of Sloan's work is that it is sometimes too detailed and reaches inaccurate conclusions through too literal an interpretation of Kosinski's statements. For example, Sloan takes issue with the claim that Mary Weir, Kosinski's first wife, was one of the richest women in America. (Sloan 1996, 180) While this may not have been completely true, since she was precluded from either selling or bequeathing any of the estate's assets, it remains a fact that she lived the life of a super-wealthy socialite until the time of her death. Mary Weir had been the chief beneficiary of her husband's will, and she lacked for nothing, having access to yachts, beautiful mansions and townhouses, exquisite jewelry, rare paintings, servants and private jet aircraft throughout her life. In this sense, Kosinski's side of the story, which argues that Mary Weir lived a life with which most people could not identify, was probably a more accurate portrait than Sloan's narrow interpretation of what it means to be wealthy.

Kosinski's friend, Musia Schwartz, felt that Sloan did not always treat Kosinski's statements with the proper degree of incredulity. The state of Kosinski's health is a case in point. Though Kosinski may not have been in perfect physical condition, Schwartz

doubts whether his arrhythmia contributed to his decision to take his own life.[14] "It seems to me," she said, "that in the end, Kosinski was a better liar than Sloan was a researcher."[15] This statement is equally true of some of the dubious sources that Sloan employed in a 1994 article in *The New Yorker* entitled "Kosinski's War." Though Sloan felt that the findings of Polish journalist Joanna Siedlecka were important enough to quote extensively in this 1994 piece, there is no mention made of her in his 1996 book. In *The New Yorker* article, Siedlecka's argument was that Kosinski had made up the totality of his childhood and that he was not in mortal danger during the war. She also accuses Kosinski's father of being a German collaborator and later, an NKVD informant. (Sloan 1994, 48 & 52) The charges against Moses Kosinski were especially scurrilous since there was never any compelling evidence presented to support such an unlikely claim.

Siedlecka's main allegation, as with so many of Kosinski's detractors (e.g. the 1982 *Village Voice* article) was that the experiences recounted in *The Painted Bird* had not happened to him personally, namely that he had not wandered alone throughout the war. Strangely, and almost despite herself, Siedlecka's investigation—later confirmed by Sloan—had the effect of showing that some of the stories in *The Painted Bird* were indeed based on fact. For example, in the Polish village of Dabrowa, there was a bird catcher named Lech Tracz upon whom Kosinski had apparently modeled the character of Lekh. It was also discovered that Kosinski had once been attacked on a frozen pond by a group of peasant boys and that in nearby Wola Rzeczycka, he had served as an altar boy. Siedlecka's own research does not support her viewpoint and is tainted, in any case by what Sloan describes as her polemical approach to her work: her zealousness in defending Poland and shredding Kosinski's reputation had the effect of downplaying "the presence of Polish

[14]John Taylor, in his piece in *New York* magazine, shared this skepticism regarding the relationship between Kosinski's health and his eventual suicide. (Taylor 1991, 24)
[15]Discussion with Musia Schwartz about the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, Montreal, 20 February 2003.

anti-Semitism." (Sloan 1994, 50) Sloan demonstrated poor judgment in utilizing such questionable work in his article. In the final analysis, all that the 1994 piece managed to show definitively was that *The Painted Bird* was a novel, not a diary. This was already well known. Fortunately, Sloan's 1996 book is a vast improvement over his first crack at Kosinski, in *The New Yorker* article.

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Professor Jerome Klinkowitz produced a number of articles about Kosinski. Perhaps his most significant contribution, however, was a 1973 interview with Kosinski (originally conducted in 1971) that he published in *Fiction International.* Here, Klinkowitz raised a number of issues with regard to Kosinski's oeuvre and eventually asks Kosinski a prescient question: "Are remembered events fictions?" (Klinkowitz 1973, 52) Kosinski's answer is revealing:

> Yes, they are fictions; even though they accommodate "autobiographic elements" they are edited out. I think our notion of ourselves is a fiction which is composed of what we have memorized, edited, created, imagined. Our recollection contains, for instance, fleeting moments of the childhood, highly telescoped, a few events from the boyhood and adolescence. (Klinkowitz 1973, 52)

This becomes an issue in Kosinski's work, eventually contributing to his decision to create *Hermit*, an autofictional experiment in which Kosinski takes the reader inside the mind of a novelist as he creates a work of fiction. In 1975, Klinkowitz included an admiring piece about Kosinski's fiction in his book, *Literary Disruptions*. In this article, Klinkowitz seemed to be totally taken with Kosinski, praising him to the skies. For example, Klinkowitz writes that "Kosinski is the consummate artist" and that "Kosinski produces art more lifelike than life itself." (Klinkowitz 1975, 84) In 1983, after the

scandal, Klinkowitz realized that he had been manipulated by Kosinski and wrote another piece entitled, "Betrayed by Jerzy Kosinski." In this article, Klinkowitz apologizes for repeating, without having first verified, the many incorrect details with which Kosinski had provided him. Klinkowitz's article documents the way in which Kosinski was able to construct a kind of psychodrama in order to impress Klinkowitz. Kosinski pretended that his own mother was in her final hours and that he had to immediately leave for Europe if he wanted to visit her one last time. Klinkowitz is totally taken in and is stunned when others report having experienced similar incidents while visiting with Kosinski. Klinkowitz's astute conclusion was that "Kosinski's autobiography seemed to have been reinvented for a transient market at each turn of events." (Klinkowitz 1985, 127) This is a vital point when trying to understand why Kosinski sometimes behaved as he did.

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Throughout his life, Jerzy Kosinski was frequently interviewed by academics and journalists, both on television and in print. One of Kosinski's first major interviews was with journalist Dick Schapp of the *New York Herald Tribune*. This piece set the tone for almost every other Kosinski interview in the decades to come. After the de rigueur description of Kosinski as a "larger than life" personality, Schapp poses the question as to whether *The Painted Bird* was a true account of Kosinski's childhood. (Schapp 1965, 3) In future interviews, Kosinski would become steadily more cryptic on this point, but at this early stage, directly after the publication of *The Painted Bird*, he does not seem quite so ambivalent, carefully accounting for the book's origins:

> "The book is not literal," Kosinski says, "but it is almost all literal incidents, shown in a way not literal, improved, cut up, fitted into a pattern. I have used the stones of my life to build a new wall. I took the literal and turned it into

> something symbolic. The book, I hope is larger than the literal and more concrete than the symbolic."
> (Schapp 1965, 3)

Though hardly categorical, Kosinski's answer is very nearly straightforward, certainly the most candid answer that he gave any interviewer on this question. To this day, Kosinski's explication of the story behind his first novel is probably best summed up in his interview with Schapp. Kosinski also concedes something else to Schapp: "Frankly, I don't think I ever felt sorry for the boy...By East European standards, he had a very safe war. He was free. " (Schapp 1965, 3) This was to become the standard answer to those critics who felt that *The Painted Bird* contained scenes of gratuitous violence.

There were a number of important interviews in the 1970s in which Kosinski discussed the ordeal of living under State Socialism. With Klinkowitz, for example, Kosinski describes the Soviet Union itself as a novel "created by the crude imagination of bad artists." (Klinkowitz 1973, 57) And with Cleveland Amory in *Saturday Review*, Kosinski argues that authoritarian government begins not with a bureaucratic culture of repression, "but in kindergarten." (Amory 1971, 7) In a 1982 interview with Barbara Leaming, Kosinski stated the following: "The cruelest thing I witnessed was the steady, relentless manipulation of individuals by the party." (Leaming 1982, 206) This became a major theme in Kosinski's work, the place of the individual within a collectivist society. Finally, in the December 1977 edition of *Psychology Today*, Gail Sheehy conducted an interview entitled, "The Psychological Novelist as Portable Man." Here, Sheehy asked Kosinski about his protagonists' need for control. Kosinski's answer was that he increasingly saw his protagonists as both "adventurers but also self-appointed reformers of an unjust world." (Sheehy 1977, 55) True to form, Kosinski wanted his writing to reflect his belief that people must be vigilant in order to stop their own victimization. Kosinski also expressed an unusual sentiment regarding those who had victimized him in Eastern

Europe: "I kept imagining how unhappy those who caused my pain would be the day they realized how uselessly they lived the only life they had." (Sheehy 1977, 56) This sort of answer is Kosinski at his most pugnacious, always seeking to give the interviewer an unexpected and provocative response.

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A number of reviews of *Steps* greatly impacted the writing of this work. One of the most significant was Irving Howe's review of *Steps* for *Harper's Magazine* in March 1969 entitled "From the Other Side of the Moon." Howe characterized Kosinski's second novel as an extension of his first, describing it as "a still further step in the emptying-out of life which had been completed in *The Painted Bird*." (Howe 1969, 103) Howe was troubled by the feeling of total detachment which pervades *Steps*, something he described as writing "from the other side of the moon: beyond heat, beyond protest, beyond alienation." (Howe 1969, 102) Stanley Kauffmann made similar comments in his review in *The New Republic* entitled "Out of the Fires." Even more than Howe, Kauffmann saw *Steps* as deriving from the earlier novel. (Kauffmann 1968, 22) In the *New York Times*, Eliot Fremont-Smith (who would later co-author the *Village Voice* piece which started the Kosinski literary controversy) stated that "*Steps* is a sequel to this book [*The Painted Bird*]—not in terms of plot (there is none in the ordinary sense) or locale (indeterminate), but in terms of logic, of a theory, perhaps of human potentiality. The narrator of *Steps* can be taken as the Polish boy grown older; and the gratuitous, nonselective cruelty of others who formed the core of human experience for the boy is now mirrored in the moral abstraction of the man." (Fremont-Smith 1968, 45) This notion of *Steps* as a continuation of *The Painted Bird* recurs in many other reviews printed at that time, including Geoffrey Wolff's "Growing Poisonous Flowers," in the 7 October 1968 edition of *The New Leader*. In his book, *American Fictions 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical*

Evaluation, Frederick Karl argues that "*Steps* is not a departure after *The Painted Bird*, but essentially a refinement of a fictional process already functioning there." (Karl 1983, 405) With so many critics and scholars in agreement on this matter, it became more plausible to design a chapter which examined *The Painted Bird* in terms of its value as a guide to reading *Steps*.

Other influential reviews of Kosinski's work include William Plummer's 1977 review of *Blind Date* in the *Village Voice* in which he notes an ongoing transformation of the Kosinski protagonist. "To say the least," he said, "the Kosinski hero is a much different man from his counterpart in the early works." (Plummer 1977, 79) John Leonard, of the New York Times, also found *Blind Date* to be a different sort of text. He points out the significance of Levanter's need to reengage with others. The last line of the review is especially curious. Leonard remarks that when Kosinski "learns to respect women he will be a fine novelist." (Leonard 1977, 33) It may be a coincidence, since his work was already moving in that direction anyway, but Kosinski seemed to take Leonard's advice to heart when writing his last three novels. Another influential review was Larry McCaffery's analysis of *Hermit* in *Washington Post Book World*. This piece came out immediately after the book's publication, in the summer of 1988, and was one of the few positive assessments that the book received. McCaffery seemed to suspect that he was reading a magnum opus. His descriptions of the text as both "a defiant, highly personalized literary response [to the scandal]" (McCaffery 1988, 1) and "an utterly original form" (McCaffery 1988, 9) help the reader understand the significance of this unusual book. The last paragraph of McCaffery's review, which characterizes *Hermit* as being "so excessive and self-involved" that it was "obviously written by Kosinski for himself" helps place this last book in its proper context, as the last word on a scandal that was never absent from Kosinski's thoughts during his final years. (McCaffery 1988, 9)

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In addition to reviews, there were a number of scholars and writers whose thoughts on Kosinski's work and whose biographical sketches of him were important to the production of this work. Barbara Gelb's "Being Jerzy Kosinski," cover story in the February 21, 1982, edition of the *New York Times Magazine* is a case in point. Although this piece clearly exacerbated the debate over Kosinski's biography and ultimately led to the publication of the *Village Voice* article (primarily because Gelb's piece repeated Kosinski's most outrageous claims verbatim) it nevertheless captures Kosinski at the height of his fame, socializing with the rich and famous and living the life of a renowned writer. Gelb records Kosinski's pretensions as well as his humanity. She saw Kosinski's biography as applicable to his fiction insofar as Kosinski's various protagonists are "extensions of, or metaphors for, the nameless boy" of the first novel. (Gelb 1982, 45) This piece thus tended to support the notion that each novel could be seen as part of a life cycle.

If the Gelb piece inadvertently helped launch the scandal by exposing discrepancies in Kosinski's biography (e.g. Gelb seems to suggest that *The Painted Bird* is more an autobiographical account than a novel), then two other pieces helped rehabilitate his tattered reputation in the years after the scandal. Six years after the appearance of the *Village Voice* article, Stephen Schiff published a piece in *Vanity Fair* entitled "The Kosinski Conundrum." This article coincided with the release of *Hermit* and was generally favourable to Kosinski, presenting him as a suave artist and raconteur, in some ways the Kosinski of old. As Schiff put it, "Jerzy Kosinski is alive and well and doing all the weird things he's always done." (Schiff 1988, 116) Schiff examined the manner in which Kosinski's own behaviour contributed to the furor surrounding his work. According to Schiff, "Kosinski comes from a world where any chink in the armor, any question about

whether you were who you pretended to be, could have proved fatal." (Schiff 1988, 167) Schiff summarizes Kosinski's primary motivation in the following passage: "the Self must fool the world, must distract it with false identities, or, failing that, hide in places it can never be found. All of which may explain some of the perplexing things Kosinski does." (Schiff 1988, 166) Where the Schiff article was particularly helpful was in its approach to *Hermit*. Schiff's piece serves as a useful introduction to Kosinski's final novel. His description of what Kosinski managed to create clarifies what the reader will experience while wading through this voluminous text:

> The *Hermit* is an attempt to portray what goes on inside a writer's mind as he composes a novel—his sexual fantasies, the readings he refers to, the way he associates his own predicament with his character's and with the predicaments of history. (Schiff 1988, 117)

Another article which brought Kosinski and his work back into the public consciousness was published in *New York* in July 1991, a few months after his suicide. "The Haunted Bird: The Life and Death of Jerzy Kosinski," by John Taylor, examines the last, turbulent years of Kosinski's life. Taylor attempts to illustrate the incredible impact that the scandal had upon Kosinski's life. According to Taylor, "Kosinski saw himself as being part of the tradition of the writer-liar, of the yarn-spinning fabulist." (Taylor 1991, 27)[16] The ever-changing stories that he made up about his life were part of his overwhelming need to entertain and mystify. They were not designed to humiliate or hurt others. Instead, they were more akin to a bad habit which Kosinski had acquired and could not manage to break. Taylor downplays the *Village Voice* scandal as merely one chapter near the end of the book of Kosinski's life. Taylor unearthed a number of interesting pieces of information about the scandal, including the fact that a number of those interviewed by

[16]According to his friend, Agnieszka Osiecka, Kosinski loved to embellish stories, so much so that "if you told Jerzy you had a Romanian grandmother, he would come back that he had fifteen cousins all more Romanian than your grandmother...and they played in a Gypsy band! (Sloan 1994, 46)

Stokes and Fremont-Smith "later repudiated the article." (Taylor 1991, 32) Taylor leaves no doubt that Kosinski was a profoundly troubled man, but that he was not quite the person presented by Stokes and Fremont-Smith in their article.

Probably the single most significant scholar in the production of this work was Professor Thomas S. Gladsky, who published a number of pieces on Kosinski's work, beginning with "Jerzy Kosinski's East European Self" in *Critique* in 1988. For Gladsky, it is Kosinski's Polish background which most accurately defines him as a writer. According to Gladsky, the fight which Kosinski's protagonists wage to "find out who they are" can be traced back to their earliest experiences, during the Holocaust. (Gladsky 1988, 122) They must reconcile their "old and new world selves." (Gladsky 1988, 123) This is what most concerns them as they go through their lives: their wish to transcend their victimhood and fit into a new society. Try as they might, however, they are not very effective in accomplishing this end. Instead, they languish on the margins of society, afraid to trust and unable to reengage. They are tortured by their survival experiences. Gladsky sees these protagonists as reflective of Kosinski's own ambivalence towards his homeland.

> His themes, his eccentric protagonists, his thematic coherence, and even his development as a writer are directly related to his own struggle to come to terms with his Polish past—a struggle which, as a common thread in all the novels, offers a way to understand Kosinski's artistic growth. (Gladsky 1988, 122)

Only in the latter novels, such as *Pinball*, does Gladsky see Kosinski as having begun the process of reconciliation. Gladsky expands upon his discussion of Kosinski in a section of his 1992 book *Princes, Peasants, and Other Polish Selves: Ethnicity in American Literature*. Here Gladsky expatiates the idea that Kosinski's work is best understood as part of a tradition of great Polish writers. Regardless of where he lived and how much he

traveled, "the Holocaust, Jewishness, the Soviets, and Poland are never out of Kosinski's mind nor far away even from his seemingly American protagonists." (Gladsky 1992, 167)

In 1998, Gladsky included an original essay for the anthology, *Critical Essays on Jerzy Kosinski*. His piece was entitled "Is There Any History in It? The Fiction of Jerzy Kosinski." Here he argues that Kosinski's fiction is "about history without being historical." (Gladsky 1998, 269) In other words, Kosinski's writing examines historical events, without itself being a historical document. It remains a work of imagination, first and foremost. Kosinski's fiction may derive from the ordeal of survival, but his genre remains the novel. Gladsky argues that Kosinski is engaged in what amounts to a "dialogue with history." (Gladsky 1998, 276) He singles out and discusses at length Kosinski's last book, *Hermit*, which deals with history in unusual ways. In his essay, Gladsky make the case that Kosinski was attempting to create "a history of literary and contemporary events that have influenced the historical self that produces the author's true self." (Gladsky 1999, 277) More than an examination of history as such, *Hermit* manages to (re)create the history of its creator, Jerzy Kosinski.

In 1999, Gladsky's published an article in *Critique,* "The Documentary Mode in Jerzy Kosinski's *The Hermit of 69th Street*," which expanded upon the aforementioned theme. In this 1999 piece, Gladsky argues that *Hermit* is best interpreted as a documentary novel. In *Hermit*, Kosinski struggles to prove to his readers that "he does not lack the talent or cultural awareness to generate and write his own books." (Gladsky 1999, 381) Throughout *Hermit*, Kosinski utilizes documents, both well known and obscure, in order to "connect himself with cultural traditions from which he previously had remained aloof." (Gladsky 1999, 380) Gladsky felt that Kosinski was striving to reposition himself as a Polish and Jewish writer, rather than just another survivor. *Hermit* is thus an attempt to redefine him to his readers. Kosinski's last book makes this case to each reader

individually. He opens up the writing process and shows his readers how a novel comes to be written.

In his 1999 article, Gladsky makes the provocative observation that Kosinski's "1400 references to texts outside the text [of *Hermit*]" might be seen as another Kosinskian "sleight of hand." (Gladsky 1999, 381) *Hermit* remains Kosinski's creation, full of spin and rationalization. It is an attempt to vindicate himself, at tremendous length, by demonstrating that only he could create one of his novels. However, Gladsky argues that much of the material in *Hermit* defies "scholarly scrutiny" and is in fact nearly impossible to verify since the sources are not always clearly identified. (Gladsky 1999, 381) Gladsky credits Kosinski with being entirely candid, in *Hermit*, about one thing: the centrality of his prior novels and his personal history to his creative life. (Gladsky 1999, 381) *Hermit* is an acknowledgment by Kosinski that his early novels, especially *The Painted Bird*, would continue to be read after he was gone and that he would tend to be judged on the quality of this work and not *Hermit*, which hardly anyone but a few critics and scholars would take the time to read. Kosinski wanted people to understand that all his novels came from inside him and were important to him, and that each novel he wrote tended to build on what he had previously written. Thus one of his novels can sometimes be employed to make sense of another. This seems a propitious moment to move on to an in-depth examination of Kosinski's fiction, starting with an analysis of *The Painted Bird* as a guidebook to understanding *Steps*.

CHAPTER TWO

VICTIM TO VICTIMIZER: *THE PAINTED BIRD* AS A GUIDE TO READING *STEPS*

SECTION I – THE ISSUE OF CONTROL

a) Bridging the Divide

The primary supposition of this chapter is that *Steps* (1968), Jerzy Kosinski's second novel, cannot be fully appreciated if not read in the context of *The Painted Bird* (1965). The idea is to utilize the first novel as a guide to the reading of the second. Though not a sequel, *Steps* is both "written against the context" and "presupposes the horror of the earlier novel."[1] *The Painted Bird* can thus be used to enhance the reader's understanding of what Kosinski is trying to accomplish in *Steps*. At the same time, this approach will allow for a reconsideration of the meaning of the earlier work. *The Painted Bird* leaves the reader with a number of unanswered questions, the most important of which is what ultimately happens to the boy after his prolonged exposure to the barbaric world of the peasant villages. While the first novel points the reader in a particular direction, the fact that the boy is never shown as an adult means that there is uncertainty regarding what becomes of him. The suspicion is that he has been transformed into a misanthrope—and an iconoclast—and that he is struggling to stay connected to society, but past this there is little to go on. By looking at the first two novels side by side, however, a pattern begins to emerge: the protagonist of *The Painted Bird* starts off as the archetypal victim, but he soon learns that he must seize control of events or be overtaken by them.

In *Steps*, this pattern is completed and the reader cannot help but be struck by the paradox of watching the victim transformed into a ruthless tormentor. In the evolution of

[1]Discussion with Yehudi Lindeman about the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, Montreal, 17 March 1999.

the Kosinskian man, from the beginning of *The Painted Bird* to the conclusion of *Steps*, the primary metaphor, of the lonely and persecuted 'painted bird' has been turned upside down. Though the protagonists of both novels are nameless, the main character of *Steps* has learned how to protect himself and has grown beyond the terrified child of the earlier work. As concerns the secondary metaphor—the loss of his capacity to speak—the protagonist of *Steps* not only retains his voice but insists that he be heard and unlike the boy, merely pretends to be a mute as another means of asserting control over others. At this early stage in his life as a novelist, Kosinski is interested in how an individual might move from abject victimhood to hardy self-reliance. In order to explore this paradoxical pattern more fully, there will first be a brief discussion of *The Painted Bird*, before moving on to a reading of *Steps* in the context of *The Painted Bird.*

b) The Significance of *The Painted Bird*

On one level, Jerzy Kosinski's 1965 novel, *The Painted Bird*, is a child's nightmare-odyssey: a six year old boy, separated from his parents, wanders alone through Eastern Europe, encountering great sadism and cruelty, entirely at a loss to fathom the source of the peasants' animus towards him. A number of critics characterize the structure of *The Painted Bird* in nearly identical terms, as a series of grisly fairy tales in which a young boy is powerless to compel his tormentors to refrain from maltreating him. On another level, however, Kosinski's haunting novel is also a powerful metaphor: the story of the painted bird, in the end, functions as a cautionary tale about society's tendency towards homogeneity, punishing expressions of individuality. In *The Painted Bird*, the child-hero never enjoys a respite from his torment. The pain he endures is all-encompassing. The intensity of his nightmare world numbs the senses and soon an odd transposition occurs. The reader realizes that the nameless protagonist has been violated and victimized so

often that his struggle is really against the social conditioning of his countrymen.[2] The individual is thus portrayed as being in a life and death struggle against society. Beginning with this first novel and running throughout his later work, control is a matter of vital importance. The other themes to which Kosinski tends to return—survival, victimization, revenge, entrapment, voice, memory, identity, obsession, sadomasochism, the eternal struggle between the individual and his society, how men interact when deprived of their emotional cores, and the haunting 'unknowableness' of others—are also present in *The Painted Bird.*

While at first the boy wishes that he could be permitted to mix with the rest of the flock, with those around him, his views gradually change. The ceaseless cruelty to which he is subjected perverts his character: he gives up any hope of rejoining the larger community. He feels only fear, paranoia and hatred. Charles Poore, in his review in *The New York Times*, argues that this transformation is inevitable, since "people who are treated unjustly do not invariably treat others justly" and "people who are discriminated against in turn may be found discriminating against others." (Poore 1965, 25) In a 1971 interview with Brandon Tartikoff, Kosinski contended that as the protagonist moves through his life, he will speak in "the voice of revenge" since he does not know another and because he has only "contempt for mankind—and for himself as a former victim." (Tartikoff 1971, 14) This matter of victimization is a very important part of how Kosinski's work functions. In *Notes of the Author on The Painted Bird* (1965), for example, Kosinski asserts that his first novel is "the result of the slow unfreezing of a mind long gripped by fear." (Notes of the Author, 14) This is a particularly revealing statement because *The Painted Bird* is deliberately written in the voice of a child. Even within the fictional world of *The Painted Bird*, however, the writer is clearly not a child. The novel is his recollection of childhood. The author weaves his story from hindsight, with an

[2]Discussion with Yehudi Lindeman about the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, Montreal, 30 April 1998.

appreciation of the meaning of events that a child could not possibly possess. For the reader, the young protagonist comes to represent all those imprisoned or brutalized by the Total State.[3] Elie Wiesel, for example, describes him as "everybody's victim." (Wiesel 1965, 5) Soon the boy is fluent in what Kosinski calls (in the Afterward to *The Painted Bird*) "the new language of brutality and its consequent new counter-language of anguish and despair." (PB, 256)

In *The Painted Bird*, Kosinski raises questions about the value of language and communication. The boy ceaselessly struggles to feel connected, but he cannot. As he observes the peasants waving to the engineers of the trains taking Jews to the "Lord's punishment," (PB, 99) he entertains the notion that God may indeed have forsaken all those "with black hair and eyes." (PB, 100) When he is thrown into the manure pit, a few pages on, the boy relinquishes—in Wiesel's terms—not only his voice but what little remained of his innocence as well. (Wiesel 1965, 46) He is the perpetual outsider. Indeed, even before losing his capacity to speak, it is clear that "his urban speech sets him apart immediately from the villagers." (Sanders 1974, 184) While the peasants typically have limited vocabularies and a plodding pattern of speech, "sparing words as one spares salt," the boy is able to tell stories from memory and recite poetry at great speed. (PB, 85) The peasants are convinced that such "verbal agility is a weakness, even dangerous." (Lilly 1988, 26) While becoming mute might itself be viewed as a defensive strategy, in the end, Kosinski seems to be arguing the opposite point: that among the peasants, the boy will never be safe. His inability to verbally communicate with others (and the theme of silence which runs throughout the remainder of the novel) is a trope for his total alienation from the community. (Notes of the Author, 17)

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[3]Kosinski's abbreviation for the totalitarian state, which he first utilized in *Steps*, 1968, 70.

Paradoxically, after the war, the boy's muteness affords him the opportunity to begin his only real friendship. While in an orphanage, he meets another youngster who has been traumatized by the war. The Silent One turns out to be a kindred spirit: while not a mute, he nevertheless deliberately refrains from speaking. After they meet, the boy's total dislocation from society appears to abate. When the Silent One derails a passenger train, ostensibly to punish a farmer who assaulted his friend, it ironically "marks the beginning of the boy's restoration to mental health." (Lale & Williams 1972, 205) Like the last line of the second last chapter of Anthony Burgess' 1962 *A Clockwork Orange*, "I was cured all right," (Burgess 1962, 139) the boy begins to see that he may attempt to reassert, recapture and re-embrace his own life. Throughout the remainder of *The Painted Bird*, there is an attempt to heal. Though ultimately abortive, it does mark the first time that Kosinski presents this very significant theme: the protagonist's craving for cleansing and regeneration. In the end, the disparity between the boy's desire for healing and society's capacity to satisfy this yearning are too much at odds. Throughout *The Painted Bird*, the protagonist is at the mercy of events beyond his control: first the war itself, which separates him from his parents, then Marta's death and the subsequent fire which destroys her house, then the crude peasant families with whom he lives, then the brutal Kalmuks...and on and on, in a seemingly endless parade of misfortune and savagery. Consequently, the boy conceives the universe as essentially unjust and brutal. No matter where he wanders, he is never allowed to forget his status as an interloper. He desperately searches for some clarification as to why he is being forced to undergo this ordeal, exploring superstition[4], religion and communism in turn, but he never procures the definitive conclusions he seeks. He briefly entertains the notion that love might be a transformative experience, until he witnesses Ewka, a peasant girl for whom he has begun to feel love, copulating first with a goat and then with her own brother.

[4]While living with Garbos, a sadistic peasant, the boy attempts to cast a spell on the man, in order to hasten his demise. When this fails, the boy manifests obsessive-compulsive behavior: convinced that the lice in his scalp are in some way connected to Garbos' brutality, he resolves to refrain from scratching his head, even after the itching becomes intolerable. (PB, 128-129)

> Something collapsed inside me. My thoughts fell apart and shattered into broken fragments like a smashed jug. I felt as empty as a fish bladder punctured again and again and sinking into deep, muddy water. (PB, 157-158)

Any possibility of recovering from the ordeal of his childhood is now impossible. From this experience, he deduces that the diabolical Evil Ones must be trying to recruit him to their side. He has been deprived of every kind of love, from parental to romantic, while being subjected to every possible injury and indignity, including the loss of his capacity to speak. (PB, 165) He desperately needs to know why this has happened, to give meaning to his experience. The boy conjectures that The Evil Ones would favour "only those who had already displayed a sufficient supply of inner hatred and maliciousness." (PB, 159) He is a natural to join The Evil Ones because he has an overabundance of all these characteristics. As time goes on, the boy does not so much outgrow his belief in pure evil, as learn to internalize it. "He begins to feel the rule of the world is to do as much harm to others as possible." (Lavers 1982, 29) All he can be certain about is that outsiders can quickly become victims. He realizes that he must learn to stand up to those who might potentially revisit upon him the disagreeable role of victim. In his *Notes of the Author on The Painted Bird*, Kosinski writes:

> The boy in *The Painted Bird* embodies the drama of our culture: the tragedy of the crime always remains with the living. This drama cannot be killed on the fronts, bombed in cities, confined in concentration camps. This drama is borne by all the survivors of the crime, both the conquerors and the conquered. Its essence is hate.
> (Notes of the Author, 28)

Even after the war, the boy "finds himself no less an outsider than he had been before." (Richter 1974, 379) The discovery that his parents have also survived the war brings the boy neither joy nor optimism. Demonstrating aloofness, he is unable (and perhaps also

unwilling) to make an emotional investment in his father and mother, lest they abandon him again in the future. He feels no connection to these strangers whom he has not seen in years, who know him by a birthmark on his chest and who, in any case, abandoned him to wander alone for the duration of the war. "Feeling himself wholly alien to the rest of his species, he takes a kind of refuge against mankind, shutting them out." (Richter 1974, 379) Kosinski characterizes the boy's reconciliation with his parents as atypical insofar as "indifference replaces joy." (Notes of the Author, 18) Through his travels, the boy learns that betrayal is only possible if one loves and trusts another person completely. Tender feelings towards others are thus a potential trap. (Lale & Williams 1972, 205) The boy deliberately short-circuits any familial sentiment by assaulting his adopted brother and deliberately disobeying his parents' wishes. Instead, he embraces the people of the "urban postwar wasteland" of the night city[5], typically men and women engaged in illegal (and often subversive) activities. (Lupack 1988, 83) Having lived for so many years as a hunted animal, the boy feels strangely at home in a world based on distrust. According to one critic, he is not so much alienated from the other characters as from the "values of civilization." (Richter 1974, 376) "Filled with the terrible poison of hatred," the boy becomes "a living symbol of those who had previously pursued him." (Notes of the Author, 28) He feels not the slightest connection to anyone or anything. Faith, hope, compassion and optimism are value systems with which he is unfamiliar. As a result, the "survival tactics" he learned while wandering alone "are not only unnecessary, but seemingly psychopathic." (Richter 1974, 376) The very concept of respectability appears alien to the boy, while danger and uncertainty are feelings to which he has grown accustomed. Unlike his earlier life in the countryside, the city strikes him as a hypocritical place of "enforced conformity." (Skau, Carroll & Cassiday 1982, 50) The boy wishes to live devoid of pretense, in a world where the rules of daily life are clear-cut and no one has

[5]After roaming alone through Eastern Europe as a tiny child, there is a dark irony to his parents' admonitions about the night city containing unknown dangers.

any expectations of him. The boy realizes that he prefers being a fugitive (as he was throughout the war) to being enslaved to "the collective society that postwar Poland was becoming." (Richter 1974, 383) The night city, populated by thieves, profiteers, smugglers and prostitutes, seems like a more organic, if not hospitable place to him.

Before he enters the world of the night city, however, the boy encounters a strange bird somewhat like himself, Mitka the Cuckoo, a Russian sniper with surprisingly individualistic sensibilities. According to Mitka, "man carries in himself his own private war, which he has to wage, win or lose, himself—his own justice, which is his alone to administer." (PB, 217) Mitka concludes that each man has a duty not to allow others to victimize him. When some villagers murder his friend, Mitka exacts retribution at random on the entire village. The protagonist explains the rationale for Mitka's behaviour:

> A man, no matter how popular and admired, lives mainly with himself. If he is not at peace with himself, if he is harassed by something he did not do but should have done to preserve his own image of himself, he is like the "unhappy Demon, spirit of exile, gliding high above the sinful world. (PB, 218)

The boy sees Mitka as successfully avenging the death of his friend while at the same time reaffirming his own identity. (Notes of the Author, 27) After his ill-treatment by the peasants, the simplicity and rationality of Mitka's ideology becomes self-evident to the boy. Mitka's belief in standing up for what he believes, regardless of the risk or the cost, becomes the "basis for [the boy's] behavior in all situations." (Notes of the Author, 26) During his time in the orphanage, socializing with the Silent One, the boy's interest in survival and revenge, both fascinating subsets of his need to control every aspect of his social environment, reach a critical mass. Unfortunately, his "ego-defense mechanisms...are too extreme for living meaningfully in less brutal surroundings." (Lale &

Williams 1972, 205) After he regains his voice, in the last paragraph of *The Painted Bird,* the Kosinskian protagonist is (re)born as a man who would never dream of relinquishing his fate to others. Could his antipathy towards his own parents be a symptom of a larger illness, his total disconnection from civil society?

For the protagonist, the inability to control the outcome of a given situation is always a cause for concern. For example, when he is suffering from a fever, Olga, the woman who looks after him, puts him in a pit, with only his head sticking out of the ground. He implicitly trusts her knowledge of folk medicine. "Like an abandoned head of cabbage," he slowly loses himself and describes the peculiar sensation of becoming one with the field. (PB, 21) A near calamity occurs, however, when she is away and a flock of ravens attack his head. This immersion serves the symbolic purpose of having the boy merge with nature, while solidifying his "alienation from his civilized heritage." (Langer 1975, 176) Like the peasants, the birds can instantly detect an impostor in their midst. He is not part of the flock. This sort of claustrophobic atmosphere pervades *The Painted Bird.* According to Albert J. Guerard, there is a recurrent motif in *The Painted Bird* "of absorption and suffocation." (Guerard 1974, 33) At various times in this book, the protagonist is stuffed into a sack, forced under the ice covering a river and (as mentioned earlier) nearly drowned in a gigantic pit of human excrement. Over time, the terror of these experiences changes the protagonist. He becomes fixated with the notion of entrapment and the omnipresent threat it poses to him. After the war, the boy participates in an odd game whereby he lies on the railroad tracks as freight trains pass above him. The boy reports that the intensity of this experience, not knowing if he will be suddenly killed or maimed, intensifies his love of life. He embraces this powerful experience and pronounces it more satisfying than "exacting the most vicious revenge from one of my enemies." (PB, 232)

Because the reaction to this book tends to be so visceral, Kosinski essentially reconceives the reader as a kind of witness to the boy's victimization. As the child clambers from the cesspool, covered in excrement, the reader is with him, rendered mute. *The Painted Bird* is thus a fiction which "assaults the reader directly, as if saying: It is about you."[6] (Klinkowitz 1975, 100) For his part, the boy comes to believe that he cannot expect "assistance from anyone," that everyone is expendable. In a particularly memorable and moving passage, the boy concludes that "it mattered little if one was mute; people did not understand one another anyway." (PB, 249) Once again, the individual is placed in polar opposition to the collective. Many of Kosinski's other recurring themes are embedded throughout the text of this first novel. For example, in *The Painted Bird* he uses a change of clothing (e.g. the boy's rags for a Soviet soldier's uniform) in order to signify a change of identity. (Halley 1965, 425) There is also an obsession with the torture of animals, bestiality and all sorts of sexual deviance. According to Lawrence Langer, *The Painted Bird* overpowers the senses of the reader and becomes "too horrible to be real." (Langer 1975, 175) But Kosinski seems to anticipate and react to this sort of criticism in the Afterward to *The Painted Bird.* According to him, many of his European friends had the opposite reaction to his novel, arguing that his "novel was a pastoral tale compared with the experiences so many of them and their relatives had endured during the war." (PB, 266)

Over and above the challenge of survival, *The Painted Bird* traces the boy's struggle to maintain his identity in the shadow of the Total State. Not surprisingly, it soon becomes clear that he is waging a losing battle. For example, when it is determined that a five year old Jewish child, tossed off a moving train by his parents, is dead, the protagonist does not feel sorrow, but relief since the other boy's presence in the village "would threaten the

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[6]Klinkowitz goes on to add that "Kosinski sees the best fiction as autobiographical and experiential not of the author, but of the reader." (Klinkowitz 1975, 101)

lives of all of us." (PB, 103) The protagonist's obsession with survival has produced a profound emotional detachment from other people. Eventually, this becomes the boy's defining feature, superseding even the possibility of sympathy for a child so like himself. This obsession runs through this novel. The continuing presence of the fierce comet, a metal can filled with damp moss and burning embers—employed for protection against animals, warmth against the cold and a heat source for uncooked food—becomes an ideal metaphor for boy's obsession with protection and control. The boy explains that because of the relative scarcity of items such as matches, "the extinction of a comet was an extremely serious thing." (PB, 28) Those without functioning comets are essentially victims in waiting.

> Just as fire was essential to the comet, the comet was essential to life. A comet was necessary for approaching human settlements, which were always guarded by packs of savage dogs. And in winter an extinguished comet might lead to frostbite as well as to the lack of cooked food.
> (PB, 29)

To those who see it, the whirling comet is a declaration of intent: the boy means to control his destiny and protect himself against a hostile world. People and animals think twice before approaching someone armed with a comet. The boy becomes inseparable from his comet, secure in the knowledge that it will protect him, come what may. In addition to being a weapon or tool, the comet is "a manifestation of the inner spark." (Lavers 1982, 39) It is a symbol of defiance and of the will to survive against great odds. The protagonist makes it very clear that a properly maintained comet will ensure his survival nearly indefinitely. Without it, he would be defenseless against the elements, his enemies and the unknown. While the protagonist has a comet, he is an individual; "without it he is at the mercy of the collective mass of man." (Lavers 1982, 39)

c) The Relationship Between the Two Texts

If, in *The Painted Bird*, the child tends to be taken advantage of whenever he falls into the care of strangers, there is (properly speaking) no Kosinskian man through much of that novel. Yet a logical pattern connects the nameless child-victim of the 1965 novel to the adult protagonist-victimizer of *Steps*, a man continually at war with society and obsessed with understanding the meaning of his own life.[7] *The Painted Bird* establishes a pattern of "a wandering protagonist, armored against attack, always on the defensive, ready to strike back, marginal to all, lacking in compassion or pity except under extraordinary circumstances, sadistic and cruel as needed, never unprepared." (Karl 1983, 153) What will be argued here is that the nightmare world of *The Painted Bird* has been transposed into *Steps*, but with a difference: the second novel is about remaining an individual in the aftermath of comparable horrors.

The protagonist who emerges in *Steps* will not allow himself to be victimized. Early on, in a scene which feels like a misplaced vignette from *The Painted Bird,* the narrator recounts one of his childhood experiences during the war: the spitting game. While boarding with a farmer, the man invents a game in which he attempts to spit directly into the boy's eyes. Unlike the protagonist of *The Painted Bird* who almost certainly would have stoically endured such treatment, the protagonist of *Steps* will not.[8] Instead, he studies the jumbled environment around him. After seeing how the peasants behave at a funeral, he discovers something important about the world: that people's emotions make them vulnerable. When the farmer beats him, the child decides to get even by murdering the farmer's

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[7]The characters with whom the boy interacts during his ordeal embody much of what the Kosinskian man will later become. For example, the child, despite himself, cannot help admiring the "superhuman" German soldier whose job it is to murder him. (PB, 118) The boy surrenders to the overwhelming power of the state. Later, the Soviet sniper, Mitka the Cuckoo, teaches him the importance of being an individual "apart from the march of the working masses." (PB, 218)

[8]This sort of revisionist history, or re-written childhood, is itself a profound attempt by the author to effect control over his life.

youngest child by persuading her to swallow fishhooks and ground glass. He quickly reasons that this will cause the farmer unending anguish, perhaps even greater than any physical pain he could administer to the contemptible man. (Steps, 36) From this incident, it is important to note how the protagonist has changed. Even as a child, he now seeks to control his destiny. It is hard to overstate the importance of this transition from a reactive child (responding to events as they transpire) to a proactive adult (stringently controlling every aspect of his existence). The childhood flashback sequence in *Steps* may be "reminiscent of the boy" from the first novel, yet it is easy to see that he is quickly evolving into the Kosinskian man[9], "the rootless traveller who shapes the destinies of others, as well as his own." (Lupack 1988, 114)

In *Steps*, the protagonist learns that survival loses its meaning without a continuing threat to his physical welfare. This psychosis becomes a part of his identity. Both of Kosinski's first two novels are about destroyed lives and the obsessions that grow out of the sadism and cruelty to which his protagonists were subjected as children. Welsh Everman argues that what emerges in *The Painted Bird* is a "desire for a universal explanation, a metaphysical key" to help the boy make sense of the world. (Everman 1991, 40) Conditioned as he is by his early recollections, the protagonist of *Steps* returns again and again, presumably looking for clues to his own behaviour, to the themes of revenge and sexual deviance and domination. Similarly, his interest in control, as it relates to entrapment, survival and the search for voice, appear as natural outgrowths of his wartime experiences.

[9]Welsh D. Everman suggests that it is in the Afterward to *The Painted Bird* (in which Kosinski discusses his own life as a quasi-extension of his novel) that the emergence of the Kosinskian hero is first foreshadowed.

d) The Transformation from Child to Kosinskian Man

Throughout *The Painted Bird*, the boy struggles to understand and exercise control over the social forces that have devastated his life. Each of the misadventures that befall him serve to reinforce his sense of helplessness. When he is buried up to his neck, or pushed into the river, or purchased by Olga, or even when the Nazi soldier decides to spare his life, the boy's fate is not his own.[10] He dreams of wrestling control of his life away from the arbitrary and often cruel social forces which he sees as trying to victimize him. Paul R. Lilly argues that the boy's immersion in the cesspool "represents a turning point in both the boy's life and the structure of *The Painted Bird*." (Lilly 1988, 28) It may be just another victim whom the peasants heave into the ooze, but the individual who climbs out has already begun his transformation. The boy realizes that he must devote every moment to evading the role of victim. Just as the best defense is said to be a good offense, so the boy learns that victimizing others may be his way out of the world of victimhood. Eventually, he comes to appreciate that his survival was due in equal measures to luck, his own cunning and the capacity to successfully adapt to each new situation and hang on (quite literally in the story of Garbos and Judas) until his luck changed or he was able to escape. Since cunning and adaptability are issues over which he exercises effective control, the boy begins to avoid confrontations in which he cannot dynamically affect the outcome. After *The Painted Bird*, the typical Kosinskian hero is "never surprised and is only initially overtaken by events." (Aldridge 1983, 61) Near the end of the novel, the boy stops running and embraces danger by attempting to conquer it.

Like the boy, the actions of the protagonist of *Steps* are guided by his knowledge of what it means to be a victim. As he departs Eastern Europe, he finds himself wishing that he

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[10] Welsh D. Everman, however, argues that the reader must be careful not to misinterpret the soldier's gesture since he seems to be acting more out of lethargy than morality. "In other circumstances, on another day," argues Everman, "he might have killed the child without thinking about it." (Everman 1991, 32)

might somehow remain suspended between his past and future, "to fix the plane permanently in the sky." (Steps, 108) This is a man obsessed with control, to the extent that it seems unlikely he will ever completely reengage with society. Instead, he spends his life attempting to establish dominance over each social interaction. This is a very different protagonist than the young boy of the first novel. The perceptions of the protagonist of *Steps* are more sophisticated than the boy's since they are those of a grown man. In this second novel, the traditional Kosinskian hero emerges, habitually studying social patterns and plotting the way in which they may be manipulated to work to his advantage. He wishes to consciously control his thoughts and feelings. This becomes apparent when, as a young student, the protagonist of *Steps* decides to answer the phone and have a conversation during sex. The girl becomes upset that the protagonist is able to maintain "an erection purely through an act of will" and declares that "she would never make love with [him] again..." (Steps, 26) He seeks to exercise control over his relationship by illustrating how little significance it actually holds for him.

The protagonist fears spontaneity because it undermines his position of absolute authority within the relationship. (Lilly 1988, 48) While a telephone traditionally signifies communication, here Kosinski cleverly employs it to convey an impression of control instead.[11] The telephone also functions as an important metaphor in *The Painted Bird.* In the final pages of that book, the protagonist hears a phone ringing and impelled by the idea that "there was someone who wanted to talk to [him]," he feels "an overpowering desire to speak." [12] (PB, 250) Here the telephone is a means for the boy's reengagement with society, while in *Steps* it serves an opposite function: to dispel intimacy. In

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[11]In part, he does this to make the reader reevaluate his traditional understanding of how narrative functions. The first sentence of *Steps*, for example, begins with the words "I was traveling further south." (Steps, 1) Since the location of the protagonist's adventures are never disclosed, this information only serves to create a diffusion of meaning and a concomitant reexamination of how people tend to take various concepts for granted. (Boyers 1972, 51)

[12]In a 1974 article in *Contemporary Literature*, David H. Richter facetiously proffers that the caller may have been a "wrong number." (Richter 1974, 381)

Kosinski's work there is a "perception that a mechanical and pitiless hostility embodied in and symbolized by the machine lies at the center of...a significant part of [the] contemporary human relationship." (Aldridge 1983, 63) This ambivalence towards technology is demonstrated frequently in *Cockpit* (1975) and *Blind Date* (1977), as Tarden and Levanter employ gadgets like cameras and listening devices in order to overpower and manipulate others.

Similarly, in the opening scene of *Steps*, the protagonist uses his credit card (at the time of *Steps* publication, a relatively new invention) to impress a simple peasant girl into accompanying him on the rest of his journey. Her initial reaction to the cards, or rather to the power the protagonist tells her they possess, is one of near-worship:

> The credit cards lay on the table. She got up and stared at them with reverence in which disbelief mingled; she stretched her right hand forward as if to touch them, but quickly withdrew it...She held it gingerly between her fingers like a sacramental wafer, raising it to the light to inspect the numbers and letters printed on it. (Steps, 3)

The card comes to represent "a cumulative measure of [the protagonist's] vital force." (Sloan 1996, 179) There is a certain sinister quality to this opening scene, since the woman naively believes his promise that he will take care of her and that nothing (except her presence) will ever be required of her. "Seeking to escape her servitude, she ironically begins another servitude, both sexual and commercial, to a new and perhaps harsher master." (Lupack 1988, 114) Since she is never mentioned again, it seems probable that the protagonist saw her as being disposable and that he deserted her once he wearied of her company. Like *The Painted Bird*, "the world of *Steps* is one of brutality and cruelty where persons are objects to be used and discarded." (Everman 1991, 49)

In addition to his control and manipulation of others, the protagonist of *Steps* also wishes to challenge himself, to know himself better. This is reflected in many of the difficult jobs he attempts upon his arrival in America. For example, after some initial trepidation, he quickly becomes proficient at driving large trucks. (Steps, 122) His physical body and reflexes become so finely honed that he is hired to become a chauffeur. Impressed by his skill behind the wheel, his employer offers to sponsor the protagonist in a strange urban sport called book-knock-off. Because success in this game is based on the sublimation of fear, incredible reflexes, concentration and confidence as well as physical conditioning, the protagonist quickly rises in this sport. Frederick Karl characterizes this game as virtually "made to order" for the protagonist since it is "purely competitive, a night contest." (Karl 1983, 406) The protagonist's very survival is at stake every time he enters another book-knock-off competition. He depends on no one but himself and he succeeds brilliantly.

When there is an accident during the competition and a bystander is decapitated, the protagonist reports the incident in passing: the victim's severed head remained outside his car for a moment and then "rolled down and hit the asphalt like one more book that had been struck off." (Steps, 128) The protagonist remains unmoved since the man did nothing to safeguard his own life. In that sense, the man played a part in his own victimization since he did not seek to effect control over the events taking place around him. The incident ends typically, with the police unable to solve the crime, and the protagonist escaping any investigation. This vignette is significant because, once again, it returns to the issue of control. When the boy of *The Painted Bird* is faced with a challenge he does not always rise to the occasion, but once the Kosinskian hero emerges, in *Steps*, the reader gets the feeling that this man cannot fail. Whether it is through words or actions, the protagonist of *Steps* remains determined to master his environment and to make his voice heard by those around him. Those characters who simply accept their fates are like the boy: helpless victims of circumstance.

e) Voice & Language

Read in the context of the earlier novel, the book-knock-off episode reveals the value of seizing control and determining one's own destiny. Since the boy does not possess the extraordinary skills of the Kosinskian man, he remains an outsider, alienated and rendered vulnerable by his incapacity to communicate. This "deprivation of language" is an important area in which these novels diverge. (Lilly 1988, 27) In the world of *The Painted Bird*, not even the death trains can "disturb the vast silences." (Langer 1975, 168) This dearth of sound creates a stylized effect, enhancing the novel's sense of foreboding. Precisely because the boy cannot hear (or at least does not report hearing) any cries of anguish coming from inside the cars, the reader is left to ponder the terrible sense of trepidation that the people on board must be experiencing, uncertain as to what sort of life (or indeed death) these trains may be taking them. According to Kosinski himself, the silence of his novel functions as an overarching metaphor for dissociation, detachment and alienation. (Notes of the Author, 17) At the same time, the boy's lack of voice (both his incapacity to be heard after his immersion in the cesspool or to be understood by others for most of the novel) functions as an ongoing metaphor for powerlessness.

By implication, each of the boy's actions reflect his struggle to find his own voice, first, figuratively and later, literally. In the process, the boy comes to associate authority with oppression. (Lilly 1988, 30) According to Lilly, the boy comes to realize the value of words, which in turn leads him to an understanding of writing as a process of liberation. Authors, after all, exercise total control over the actions and lives of their characters. (Lilly 1988, 29) By relating the horrific story of his childhood, the author is attempting to reassert control over the plot of his life. The train derailment, for example, is an (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to punish his adversary, thereby breaking the cycle of victimization. The issue of voice comes up again at the end of the novel, when the boy

unexpectedly regains his. By now, the reader is well acquainted with how he thinks: having been mute for so long, he will be tempted to continue behaving as a mute in the future in order to induce people to let down their guard around him.

In *Steps*, the protagonist encounters a woman who, perceiving the 'mute' protagonist as unthreatening, feels freer to explore her own sexuality. While engaged in the act of love, she suddenly begins speaking in an exotic language with which the narrator is familiar. The release of the woman's "passionate flow of words," orchestrated as it is by the protagonist, reveals "the self she has kept hidden." (Lupack 1988, 124) In another scene, the protagonist engenders sufficient trust to be assigned to stand watch over a particularly bizarre local gang-bang ritual. However, when the protagonist finds himself in a foreign land during a rebellion, this implicit trust is exposed as a double-edged sword. The revolutionary group he joins forces him into a situation in which he must execute a prisoner.

Of his many disguises, his deaf-mute impersonation remains one of the Kosinskian man's most effective. Ultimately, what separates *The Painted Bird* from *Steps* is that the protagonist of the second novel "consciously [chooses]" his muteness, "unlike the hysterical silence of the boy." (Everman 1991, 51) The protagonist of *Steps* knows that details can be easily manipulated to create false impressions. Knowing what others are liable to think allows him to rigorously manage their responses to him. This helps him avoid becoming a victim like the boy.

In *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination,* Lawrence Langer characterizes *The Painted Bird* as a "speechless novel," insofar as the protagonist's reaction to the atrocities taking place around him is complete dissociation from humanity, his link with the larger society irreparably severed. (Langer 1975, 168) If Kosinski's message is that victims have

no voice, then even the scraps of paper, presumably messages or last farewells from the Jews on the trains, are meaningless. According to the boy, "the words were often washed off by the morning dew or bleached out by the sun." (PB, 105) It is as though nature itself is part of the conspiracy to silence these already voiceless men, women and children.[13] The boy learns that his best chance for survival lies in learning the language of his oppressors. (Lilly 1988, 23) In a 1971 interview, Kosinski asserted that the boy could not help being "full of contempt for mankind—and for himself as a former victim." (Tartikoff 1971, 14)

Even after regaining his voice and sharing his story, the protagonist experiences little, if any, catharsis, and his sense of alienation remains. Moreover, there is every indication that he views his newfound voice as "an ironic and perhaps useless gift." (Langer 1975, 190) In the final chapter of *The Painted Bird*, the protagonist argues that "every one of us stood alone" and that "everyone knew only himself." (PB, 249) Regaining his voice does not change who he has become; the echo of the boy's survival experience will continue to reverberate throughout the rest of his life.

It is especially important to address the question of why *The Painted Bird* is written in the voice of a child. First, the writer—whom the child will later become—is searching for an unusual way to convey his experience. Essentially, the book's episodic structure (which Kosinski will return to again and again in his other novels and, of course, in *Steps*) functions as a somewhat disjointed and yet richly vivid recollection of what might have happened "to a boy who did survive all the outrageous cruelty depicted in the book." (Hicks 1968, 51) In addition, the fact that the book is a retrospective view of childhood

[13]Of the other items which fall from the trains, Kosinski reports that the illiterate peasants value photographs most of all. Though they have no connection to the people in the pictures, they nevertheless collect and trade the photos like baseball cards. According to the boy, "In some houses, there was a picture of Our Lady on one wall, of Christ on the other, a crucifix on the third, and pictures of numerous Jews on the fourth." (PB, 105)

means that Kosinski has given the boy a unique tool, "the vocabulary of an adult," so that he may more vividly describe what he is witnessing. (Lilly 1988, 38) Second, *The Painted Bird* is at its most shockingly effective when the child merely reports events, such as finding ashes, bones and handfuls of human dust beside the railway tracks, while not fully appreciating their significance. (PB, 104)[14] The reader must deduce for himself what is happening. (Lilly 1988, 38) Finally, the novel demonstrates that the boy's survival experience is an integral part of his identity. In the future, his dreams will be populated by the vicious tormentors whom he encountered throughout the course of *The Painted Bird.* Alvin Rosenfeld is undoubtedly correct in his assessment that "No one touched by the Holocaust is ever whole again." (Rosenfeld & Greenberg 1978, 27)

In his *Notes of the Author*, Kosinski describes a "feeling of alienation [which] floats on the surface of the work and manifests the author's awareness, perhaps unconscious, of his break with the wholeness of self." (Notes of the Author, 17) When the boy loses his voice, he is acknowledging that he will be perpetually unable to heal himself. His agony will be unrelenting throughout the rest of his life. He has no choice but to terminate relations with the "human world [which] is a constant source of pain for him." (Everman 1991, 43) By the time the boy regains his speech, his language is no longer that "of a victimized boy; it is the mature language of one who controls—or withholds—it, as the narrator of *Steps* and later protagonists do." (Lupack 1988, 86)

While the protagonist of *The Painted Bird* spends most of his time struggling for control, a control which eludes him, the protagonist of *Steps* is better emotionally equipped to achieve his objectives. *Steps* is about a man transfixed by the language of power. His aim is to make others question and reevaluate their priorities. He rejoices whenever he is able

[14]This is readily apparent in the boy's description of the blinding of the plowboy and the sweetly naive way in which the boy envisions that his prayers of indulgence will save him from Garbos and Judas. (Lilly 1988, 38-39)

to subvert the established order, even in seemingly inconsequential ways. In a particularly unusual scene in *Steps*, the protagonist is AWOL from his military base on National Day and is discovered naked in a forest by an army marching band.[15] The protagonist stands at attention and does not attempt to run, despite the fact that he has an erection. In his biography of Kosinski, James Park Sloan interprets this scene as Kosinski's character flipping a stylized "bird" at the authorities. (Sloan 1996, 85) This is the sort of quasi-subversive act one would expect of a man who had vowed never again to be a victim and yet finds himself living in an oppressive Soviet style satellite state. Continuing what was begun in *The Painted Bird*, *Steps* continues a movement toward a more independent protagonist with confidence in his own decisions. And though he may be just "as alone as the boy...[he is]...no longer defenseless" (Aldridge 1983, 60)

f) Subverting Established Notions of the Novel

In one sense, the protagonist of *Steps* is a dynamic new force in Kosinski's prose. Yet *Steps* itself is not so much a departure as an evolution or progression from the world of *The Painted Bird.* Irving Howe, for instance, points out that at least the other characters in *The Painted Bird* are given names. *Steps,* in contrast, completes the "emptying out of life which had almost been completed in *The Painted Bird.*" (Howe 1969, 103) Throughout *Steps*—as the title connotes—there is a relentless sensation of movement. One possible interpretation is that Kosinski is writing about the steps which took this protagonist away from his homeland. Naturally, steps come in all shapes and sizes: some steps move a person away while others bring them back and a series of confused steps might have the effect of transporting someone in a circle. In addition, steps taken while standing in place do not result in forward progress of any kind. Again, Kosinski's wish is

[15]Martin Tucker argues that in Kosinski's work, the clothing or uniforms which people wear is enlightening insofar as nakedness does not reveal identity as well as "the clothing which the character has subsumed into his personality." (Tucker 1968, 319)

to subvert established notions, in this case of movement. Another possible meaning of steps is stages. (Karl 1983, 405) As the protagonist moves through a number of different vignettes, each representing different parts of his existence, he is seen from a variety of different angles. These stages of life, when placed together, circumscribe the essence of the narrator. According to Martin Tucker, the new protagonist's steps may be smaller, but "the totality of his journey is as profound as the one experienced in the earlier novel." (Tucker 1968, 319) What strikes many critics about *Steps* is its intrepidity in delving headlong into the matters of sexuality, violence, perception and identity in very unique ways. At times it is profoundly disturbing. In this sense it is a direct outgrowth of *The Painted Bird.*

The idea of the painted bird grew out of an incident which arouse in Kosinski's first non-fiction work, *No Third Path.* In that book, the story of the painted bird, with its theme of individuality in the face "of a hostile collective" made its first appearance. (Sherwin 1981, 29) His 1965 novel of the same name makes even greater use of the aforementioned metaphor: in addition to being the book's title, the story is also its main symbol and a nickname of sorts which critics gave to the novel's unnamed protagonist. While the boy's experience is essentially archetypal, in that he represents the suffering of so many, "Kosinski's vision of the Holocaust is so effective because it focuses on a single life." (Karl 1983, 151) The child who endured the war will never be the same. His life has been contaminated by the survival experience. In *Steps*, Kosinski moves on to explore a life pulverized, gnarled and perverted by the pain of memory. The nameless protagonist is too transfixed by his own agony to ever allow himself to transcend it. In this way, "*Steps* is not a departure from *The Painted Bird*, but essentially a refinement of a fictional process already functioning there." (Karl 1983, 405) After *The Painted Bird*, the Holocaust hovers on the horizon of Kosinski's work, never coming fully into focus. This in turn creates an ominous feeling which becomes a part of Kosinski's style. Even in the

early part of *The Painted Bird*, the war itself is rarely discussed and the boy only occasionally encounters Nazis. Yet, the events are probably even more poignant precisely because mass murder, as such, is only indirectly portrayed, making the reader more aware of the macabre backdrop of death which surrounds the boy. In this way, Kosinski impels his readers to become "a participant in the fictive event." (Sherwin 1981, 13)

Even the peasants are largely unaffected by the German occupation, except that they are frightened by the unpleasant prospects for their village should they be discovered to be harbouring a Gypsy or Jewish stray, such as the boy. Though this no doubt adds to the cruelty the child must endure, the basic point here is that his reception would not have been much warmer, among the brutish peasants (should he have found himself in the countryside, for some other reason), even if there had not been a war raging across Europe. Kosinski's fiction is thus fairly unusual:

> He does not need Germans for his Holocaust; nor does he need camps. The peasants on one side, trains with doomed passengers rushing to their deaths on the other, the boy in the exact center of it all—these three elements serve as his Holocaust. (Karl 1983, 153)

Of the protagonists who emerge in Kosinski's fiction after the boy, John Aldridge maintains "any one of them might have come out of Dachau or Auschwitz." (Aldridge 1983, 60) While the boy's objective was simply survival, the protagonist of *Steps* has more auspicious goals: he wishes to enhance the meaning of his survival by controlling not only his own life but also the lives of those about whom he is curious. In *The New York Review of Books*, D.A.N. Jones argues that *Steps* is primarily concerned with "the relation between planning and spontaneity in human life." (D. Jones 1969, 18) Despite meticulous preparations, however, the protagonist sometimes finds himself the victim of blind luck. Immediately following the incident with the peasant girl and the charge card, the

protagonist relates the story of how, as an archeological assistant, he became stranded on an island without any money. To keep from starving to death, he is forced to have sexual relations with two unattractive women. This story reverses the roles of the first vignette, with the women now taking advantage of the protagonist. He is reduced to the one position he most abhors: that of helpless victim.

One thing uniting the two works is their uncanny appreciation of how society functions. The first novel describes the devastation of a world gone mad, while the second presents a man whose identity has been transformed beyond recognition. The protagonist of *Steps* understands only too well that most people cannot identify with victims to any great degree: their imaginations in contrast, "gravitate toward the pole of the oppressor's voice." (Lilly 1988, 57) This position is presented as inevitable. The lesson seems to be that "the trauma of victimization, amplified to a cacophonous degree during the Holocaust, continues in a modulated form in the post-Holocaust world." (Sherwin 1981, 14) For Kosinski, the oppressor is eternal, hence his capacity to set the rules is beyond question; meanwhile, the victims suffer (and die) in silence. While a member of a jury, the protagonist describes those on the panel as thinking only in terms of the purported murderer and his reasons for acting as he did. His victims, on the other hand, are barely mentioned. (Steps, 95) Even the protagonist, a former victim himself, cannot help identifying with those perpetrating violence, rather than those suffering from its effects. To the protagonist, there are only victims and oppressors; every other kind of relationship is a variation on this basic theme. (Lilly 1988, 56) This recurrent pattern, of unrelenting persecution and misery, energizes the Kosinskian hero, a man incapable of remaining a victim for very long.

g) Images of Entrapment

One image which recurs throughout Kosinski's fiction is entrapment. In *The Painted Bird*, the boy hides in a haystack, sleeps in a rabbit hutch, is buried up to his neck in the earth and pushed under the ice. These sorts of images appear just as frequently in *Steps*, but they have a different meaning. In the latter novel, the protagonist is interested in what entrapment means to others. For example, the protagonist is fascinated by a woman who watches an octopus in an aquarium consuming its own tentacles. The woman seems unmoved by the plight of the unfortunate mollusk. The protagonist is clearly attracted to the woman's cool and clinical detachment: the octopus' umbrage with its incarceration is meaningless to her. Throughout *Steps*, the protagonist demonstrates emotional indifference to the suffering of others. Krystyna Prendowska describes the nameless protagonist as being "totally impersonal, a thing acting upon a thing." (Prendowska 1978, 17)

One of the most startling images in all of Kosinski's work is the naked woman he discovers imprisoned in a cage. The protagonist approaches the village priest, who clearly knows about the sexual abuse to which this unfortunate woman has been subjected, perhaps for years. He asks, "Father, of what value has your stewardship been to this village?" (Steps, 95) Clearly, Kosinski views any religion that would permit such abominations as morally bankrupt. The priest seems incapable of providing even the most basic kind of moral leadership to his parishioners, many of whom were confessing their sins to him on a regular basis. It could be argued that the woman's imprisonment is a metaphor for the oppressive nature of the church's patriarchy. She has been entrapped by a repressive culture, in which the entire male population, including the clergy, has been exploiting her. The scene concludes on a grim note, with a number of older women lining up to confess their sins to the very same priest. According to James Park Sloan, *Steps*

deals with "man's entrapment by social systems that profess to provide protection, particularly collective ones." (Sloan 1996, 242) The protagonist realizes very early in life that things are seldom as they appear. To him, interpersonal relationships boil down to a simple struggle for power. Inevitably, one partner will always be stronger and will thus emerge as the master. (Sloan 1996, 242) Which brings this discussion around to Kosinski's experience of the Total State.

While a student at university, the protagonist encounters The Philosopher, a university student whose extreme wish for privacy necessitates him becoming an authority on the city's elaborate system of public lavatories. The Philosopher's need for solitude is considered antithetical to the goals of State Socialism and he is "removed from the university for his antisocial behavior." (Steps, 70) Eventually, he commits suicide rather than submit to the tyranny of the collective. According to Howe, Kosinski is adept at communicating "the deracinated atmosphere of Europe in the totalitarian age." (Howe 1969, 102) The story of The Philosopher produces a feeling of foreboding: individuality has effectively been outlawed. The lurid details of The Philosopher's suicide are subordinate to the lesson which the protagonist, while a young man, learns about the crushing power of the Total State. This incident of individual suffering is easily juxtaposed with another of mass suffering.

Immediately after the conclusion of the war, while still a child, the protagonist captures hundreds of butterflies and while waiting for them to suffocate, bets with friends on which of the insects will survive longest. Soon, all that remains of the insects is a pile of "lifeless wisps." (Steps, 104) In this scene, the protagonist is demonstrating a different kind of control: that of the behavioural scientist studying or experimenting on a laboratory animal. (Jordan 1969, 666) The fixation with survival that arises in *The Painted Bird* has been transposed into *Steps*. The protagonist, while hardly more than a child in the

butterfly episode, now plays the role of executioner. In his later experience with The Philosopher, the protagonist of *Steps* begins to realize that he could never survive for very long within a totalitarian state. The protagonist does not wish to live in a world where public lavatories represent the last remnant of the private sphere. In such a place, the individual has scarcely more value than one of the dead butterflies.

h) Keeping One 'Step' Ahead

According to Kosinski in his *Notes of the Author*, the protagonist of *The Painted Bird* "survives because he cannot do otherwise, because he is a total incarnation of the urge for self-realization and self-preservation." (Notes of the Author, 16) For the boy, the only alternative to his own survival is resignation, submission and death. His identity is profoundly altered by this realization. For the boy, "each new day...as for the camp inmate, is a threat, not a promise: any values beyond the physical have no opportunity to develop, as all his energies are exhausted by the mere effort to keep the body in existence." (Langer 1975, 178) As the Kosinskian man evolves, his interest in survival develops along with him. Like the boy, the protagonist of *Steps* quickly deduces that he must become even more ruthless than his enemies in order to survive. In order to remain one step ahead of his potential enemies, the protagonist strives to develop a "greater self-awareness and control." (Sanders 1974, 177) In addition, he employs specific tactics so that he will remain in control. For example, he begins to treat people as things, testing his control of each "situation by gauging how much cruelty, love, [and] sadism he is able to will into his experiences." (Tucker 1968, 319) He conducts experiments into the nature of human behaviour. The protagonist desires to exercise control over everyone with whom he has more than cursory dealings.

This "problem of control" runs throughout this and later novels as the protagonist's interest in power swells to a veritable fixation. (Harper 1971, 213) The main character of *The Painted Bird*, at least at first, has a very different relationship to power. When confronted by a Nazi soldier, for example, he remains stoic:

> I placed infinite confidence in the decision of the man facing me. I knew that he possessed powers unattainable by ordinary people. (PB, 119)

The soldier is described as superhuman. The boy does not have a negative reaction to authority, but rather wishes that he could exercise such control over others. Though he remains a victim throughout most of *The Painted Bird*, there are important moments when he tries to reassert control. For example, when the carpenter decides that the boy is bringing bad luck to his farm, the child struggles to find a way to save himself. Eventually, he manages to knock the carpenter into a bunker full of rats, which literally eat the man alive. Notwithstanding this early vignette, most of Kosinski's first novel has to do with victimization and the mind-set which accepts this situation. Most of what happens to the boy remains beyond his control. He merely survives from moment to moment. As a result, he concludes that the maintenance of control is of paramount importance. The protagonist of *Steps* also seems to carry this lesson with him. He refuses to be made a victim and instead victimizes others. Near the end of *Steps*, the protagonist ruminates about how he plans to addict a woman to drugs in the hope that "like a polyp she would expand and develop in unpredictable ways." (Steps, 131) This curious statement reveals the way in which he derives pleasure from experimenting with other people's lives. Similarly, during one of the many vignettes of conversation interspersed throughout the novel, the protagonist reveals how he infiltrated and bugged several adjacent apartments and later dated a woman who moved into one of them. Interestingly, he only loses interest in the woman once she falls in love with him. The protagonist is unmoved by the

woman's emotions: his interest lies in how far this affection will allow him to manipulate her.

i) The Protagonist as Puppeteer

The protagonist of *Steps* delights in making people do and feel things they otherwise would not without his intervention. When a vignette begins with the words "There was a man at the university who had wronged me," (Steps, 37) the reader is virtually assured that something truly terrible must befall this antagonist. The details of how the protagonist has been wronged (or indeed if he has been wronged at all) are irrelevant. The last line confirms what the reader suspected:

> During the court-martial he insisted that backed by the password he had acted under direct orders from the city's garrison. He clung pathetically to his story. (Steps, 13)

In the space of two pages, the protagonist has first discredited and then disposed of his enemy. His act of sabotage has been flawlessly conceived, so that it cannot possibly be traced back to him.[16] Sometimes, however, even brilliantly conceived plans are insufficient. When the protagonist becomes obsessed with a woman at his workplace, he tries to pursue her, but she remains unresponsive. This only seems to pique his interest. The protagonist begins watching the woman's apartment. Soon he concocts a plan whereby a friend will seduce the woman. Once the friend establishes a relationship with the woman, the man will order her to prove her devotion by submitting to another man, the protagonist. Despite her initial protestations, the woman reluctantly agrees. While she is blindfolded, the protagonist makes love to her, but afterwards, he feels unfulfilled. In some ways, he is more frustrated after the sexual liaison than before it.

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[16]It is at this point that the Kosinskian man officially comes into being.

> I was aware that to her I was no more than a whim of the man she loved, a mere extension of his body, his touch, his love, his contempt. I felt my craving grow as I stood over her, but the consciousness of my role prevailed over my desire to possess her. (Steps, 101)

The protagonist realizes that the woman still cannot care for him and love him unconditionally, as he would have liked. The power he exercised over her was fleeting. Behind the blindfold, the woman has no idea who is exploring her body, hence she cannot even acknowledge what they have shared together. He has not impacted her emotions in any measurable way. She does not love him and never will. In this context, control is an illusion. According to Welsh Everman, "when he is on his own, he tries to move closer to others, but if others come too close, he breaks away." (Everman 1991, 51) After the incident with the blindfolded woman, the reader is left with the sneaking suspicion that his interest in the woman was intimately connected with her refusal to sleep with him. As with the woman whose apartment he bugs, the protagonist feels a need to stimulate emotions in others, so that he may then manipulate them. Moreover, the protagonist has an ingrained sense of individuality which tends to drive others from his company. (Everman 1991, 15) This need to exploit derives directly from his survival experience. After being brutalized by others, his need to objectify becomes a mania. Ironically, his need has the effect of sabotaging his life and narrowing his range of experience.

Ultimately, the protagonist cannot control every aspect of his life because "a chance event is always a very real possibility." (Everman 1991, 50) For example, when the protagonist attempts to have sex with the lady he met at the aquarium (who was transfixed by the suffering of the octopus), he is unable to complete the act. Frustrated by his inability to perform, he leaves the octopus woman, and picks up a prostitute. Only after they are alone does the protagonist realize that he is with a man. Again, control has somehow managed to elude him. This scene is similar to another in *Steps*. In the second last vignette

of that novel, the protagonist unexpectedly becomes part of an execution. The fact that he was about to be transformed into a murderer was unknown to him even minutes before he became one. The incident ends before the actual execution, but the absence of an alternative suggests that he was probably forced to murder the other man. For someone who places so much store in remaining in charge, it is particularly painful to have to relinquish control in this way. Likewise, much of what transpires in *The Painted Bird* is about maintaining this type of control. When the Silent One and the boy realize that they can derail a train by sending it over a cliff, the boy is "overcome by a sense of great power. The lives of the people on the train were in [his] hands." (PB, 233) The boy learns to relish this feeling. In *Notes of the Author*, Kosinski argues that the significance of the derailment is that it concludes a vital role-reversal in which "the oppressed become the oppressors." (Notes of the Author, 26) For the first time, the boy knows what it feels like to victimize others. In addition, victims like the boy and the Silent One are not being taken to concentration camps, but are instead fighting back again those who either oppressed them or stood by and watched while others did. (Notes of the Author, 26)

j) Searching for Totalizing Explanations

While still a young boy, the protagonist of *The Painted Bird* wonders why everyone around him seems to despise those who are different.

> Wouldn't it be easier to change people's eyes and hair than to build big furnaces and then catch Jews and Gypsies to burn in them? (PB, 103)

He fears that by the conclusion of the war, "only fair-haired, blue-eyed people would be left in the world." (PB, 100) As a result, he dreams of inventing a machine which could "change old skin for new and alter the color of the eyes and hair." (PB, 93) His alienation

from those around him is nearly complete. He is convinced that there must be a rational explanation for what has befallen him, so he searches in vain for an explanation. Even after *The Painted Bird*, "the figure of the outsider informs his [Kosinski's] entire fictional canon." (Skau, Carroll & Cassiday 1982, 49-50) All that the boy desires is acceptance. At this stage, he still tends to associate individuality with castigation. Only in the later novels does the Kosinskian hero learn to embrace his individuality.[17] As the boy continues on his journey, "he discovers no ordering pattern. Instead, he sees his life as a series of stepping stones, leading nowhere." (Brown 1980, 83) In essence, the boy is looking for a comprehensive explanation for the peasants' brutality. He also wishes to know the reason for the atrocities which he has heard the Nazis are perpetrating. He longs for a metaphysical key to unlock the secrets of human behaviour. What the boy wants most is power over his fate and he blames himself for not being able to figure out how to get it. About half way through the novel, after he is introduced to Catholicism, he remarks:

> I stopped blaming others; the fault was mine alone...I had been too stupid to find the governing principle of the world of people, animals and events." (PB, 132)

For a short time, until he learns otherwise, his prayers of indulgence give the boy solace. Eventually, the Soviet political officer, Gavrila, informs the boy "that the order of the world had nothing to do with God, and that God had nothing to do with the world. The reason for this was quite simple. God did not exist." (PB, 197) At the end of the novel, the boy comes to the conclusion that there is no metaphysical key to life: instead, he must control his own destiny. To avoid becoming a victim, he must control as much of his life as possible. The boy develops "a unique destructive drive" in which the unknown is perceived as a potential threat. (Notes of the Author, 25) As previously discussed, even his reunion with his parents is abortive: he is uncertain that they can be trusted. Like

[17] If this happens at all in *The Painted Bird*, it occurs after the boy regains his voice.

many survivors, he is left with "deeply ingrained feelings of hollowness and worthlessness. (Sloan, 1996, 271) The Kosinskian hero is "not at home in the social order or in the human world at large, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually." (Everman 1991, 15) Especially in his first two novels, Kosinski's protagonists are unfulfilled and resentful about the grim hand that fate has dealt them. These are men "at the moral/social/psychological/physical extremes of human experience." (Everman 1991, 14) They have been systematically deprived of the positive life experiences which could have healed them and made them whole. Instead, they are left confused, unable to effectively reengage with society. In *Steps*, there is a palpable feeling of entrapment, as the protagonist is gradually imprisoned by his need to dominate every situation. (Karl 1983, 502) In many ways, he is enslaved by his personality, which complicates and then devastates his relationships with the other characters. In this endless loop, he cannot reengage until he heals himself, but he cannot heal himself until he reengages with others. This creates a kind of paralysis as he watches his world falling to pieces. As he turns ever more deeply inward, he begins to feel detached from society. Eventually, all he has to define himself is a powerful sense of his own individuality. The collective is his enemy. For the Kosinskian man, however, this had not always been the case.

After the end of the war, the protagonist of *The Painted Bird* continues searching for an explanation of what has happened to him. After being injured by the Kalmuks, he is rescued by the Red Army and eventually adopted by a Soviet communications regiment. Gavrila and Mitka the Cuckoo nurse him back to health, treating him, for one of the first times in the book, "with decency and love." (Lavers 1982, 41) "From his Russian liberators, the boy [is] exposed to a new source of meaning, identity and morality—the communist state." (Sherwin 1981, 20) Gavrila explains that the Red Army wishes to free the enslaved peoples of Eastern Europe.

> There would be no rich and poor, no exploiters and no exploited, no persecution of the dark by the fair, no people doomed to gas chambers. (PB, 198)

According to Gavrila, "The Party could see further than the best sniper" and would inevitably know best how each person could best contribute to the collectivity. (PB, 201) Gavrila goes on to explain that those like the boy, who had been rescued from Nazi tyranny, owed a debt of gratitude to Stalin.

> In accordance with one of the rules of human history, said Gavrila, a man would from time to time spring up from the vast nameless mass of men; a man who wanted the welfare of others, and because of his superior knowledge and wisdom he knew that waiting for divine help would not help matters on earth very much. Such a man became a leader, one of the great men, who guided people in their thoughts and deeds, as a weaver guides his colored threads through the intricacies of the pattern. (PB, 198)

To the boy, communism holds the promise of explaining the universe in logical terms. It also "offers the boy the possibility of belonging, of escaping from his isolation into the collective." (Everman 1991, 42) For the first time in *The Painted Bird*, there seems to be a chance that the boy may be accepted by those around him. Only after encountering Mitka, a top sharpshooter, does the boy begin to rethink what Gavrila has told him. After the assault and murder of some of his friends by a group of drunken peasants, Mitka decides, against specific order, to kill several of the peasants. What is significant is that "Mitka acts independently of the collective, without authority, thus jeopardizing his position in the army, his place in Soviet society." (Sherwin 1981, 21) To the boy, who already idolizes Mitka, this is a daring and inventive act: so much so, that he begins to think again in terms of the individual, rather than the collective. In addition, he sees that

identity derives from each person's individual values and in how they choose to live their lives. Mitka's act of individuality becomes the ideal for the Kosinskian man.[18]

k) The Individual Versus the Collectivity

As a "cog in a giant machine," the boy begins to feel repressed and dispensable. (Sherwin 1981, 31) Gavrila's earlier descriptions of life in the Soviet Union, which the boy accepted without question, take on a divergent meaning. Self-purging, judgment by the collective, nonstop surveillance, and the shadow of a man's family background following him through life are antithetical to the boy's growing belief in the value of individuality. He fears that "involvement in a group inevitably means the submerging of the Self, the more so in the collective society that postwar Poland was becoming." (Richter 1974, 383) The boy does not wish to live in a system that punishes individuality. Over time, he "realizes that he had been free as a fugitive during the war by comparison with his present slavery to the almighty Group, and that mentally, now, not physically, he is again an outsider." (Richter 1974, 383) His initial wish to rejoin the flock has been supplanted by the realization that life within any collectivity would ultimately diminish him as an individual. As part of the collective, he would be effectively robbed of his independence.

When the Kosinskian man resurfaces in *Steps*, he is bitter and frustrated by his life under communism. Like Byron L. Sherwin's characterization of Kosinski himself, the protagonist of *Steps* feels that "the collectivist mentality of eastern European communism and his own philosophy of individualism [are] clearly irreconcilable." (Sherwin 1981, 3) As his plane departs his homeland, the protagonist feels "cheated and robbed: so many

[18]There is a vignette in *Steps* which is peculiarly reminiscent of this scene, in which the protagonist witnesses a regimental sniper killing two civilians. Later, a truckload of regimental soccer players is killed when a truck drives through an artillery practice field that was usually marked with warning signs. It seems likely that the protagonist himself took down the signs. (Lavers 1982, 65)

years had led to nothing more than a seat on a plane." (Steps, 108) The time spent living in an atmosphere of repression has left him frustrated. He feels he has no choice but to leave. Upon his arrival in America, however, he learns that he has exchanged one type of subjugation for another, more subtle kind. Kosinski employs a fascinating metaphor to signify the transition from the protagonist's existence behind the Iron Curtain to his life in America. One of the protagonist's possessions is a Siberian wolf fur coat. Over time, the coat begins to shrink and stiffen and because of the work he is doing, becomes stained with paint particles. Ivan Sanders characterizes the ungainly jacket as "a marvelously Gogolian symbol of his [the protagonist's] feelings of strangeness and isolation. Just as the coat deteriorates...so does his past life begin to appear remote and useless." (Sanders 1974, 176) When the coat is ripped apart and destroyed during a fistfight, a symbolic layer of his Eastern European identity has been effectively stripped away. James Park Sloan explains that underneath "one of the many layers...resides his true self, a thing encased deep within social and physical protections." (Sloan 1996, 104)

According to Sherwin, Kosinski found "the popular culture and the consumer society in America to be as indoctrinating, as dehumanizing, and as oppressive as the Russian control of the individual by the Communist Party." (Sherwin 1981, 33) Even in the west, the Kosinskian man continues to conceive the individual as being engaged in a battle with what Samuel Coale calls the "collective forces of society, those outside forces beyond the individual which are being used to create and control that individual's consciousness—political parties, television, the universities, the army." (Coale 1974, 359) The protagonist wishes to determine his own destiny, but he realizes that there will always be collectivities trying to assign an identity to him. Throughout *Steps* (as well as much of Kosinski's later work) the Kosinskian hero's western mentality is still heavily informed not just by his experiences under communism, but also by his memories of life

during the Nazi occupation. What he learned among the peasants in *The Painted Bird* will also come in handy during his adventures traveling through American culture.

SECTION II - THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

a) The Victimization Experience

According to Welsh Everman, Kosinski's world "is one of brutality and cruelty where persons are objects to be used and discarded." (Everman 1991, 49) Whether it is the young boy's experience being pushed under the ice or the miller blinding the plowboy or the savageness of the Kalmuks, Kosinski's first novel is filled with pain. People maim and kill one another with impunity. Kosinski's wish may be "to make us aware of the nature and of the implications of victimization." (Sherwin 1981, 33) In *The Painted Bird*, all outsiders are potential victims. The way in which the boy abjectly surrenders his life—not once but twice—to the 'better judgment' of Nazi soldiers, offers a useful illustration of how the mind of the victim functions. The boy is engaging in a "negation of himself, because he has ceased to function as a subject, in-himself. He becomes of-himself, justifiable only when another judges him, chance having dissolved will." (Karl 1983, 154) After meeting Mitka, however, the boy's views begin to change. He probes for weakness, searching for ways to turn the tables on his oppressors. Even in the post-Holocaust world, Kosinski's vision continues to be one of victimization as a ubiquitous phenomenon. Once the boy and the Silent One derail the train, there is a dawning realization that the boy may finally move from object to subject, at least within the context of his own life. (Sherwin 1981, 151) He no longer has to be a victim. In a 1968 article in *Time,* the parallel themes between *The Painted Bird* and *Steps* are summarized as follows:

> It is the flat, emotionless tone of the survivor whose shattering experiences have set him outside the conventional boundaries of the human race. No longer capable of giving or receiving compassion, the victim—the painted bird—has survived and grown into a bird of prey that thrives on acts of voyeurism, cruelty and revenge. (D. Jones 1969, 114)

The Kosinskian man longs to put his firsthand knowledge of what it means to be a victim to work for him. Whenever he perceives a threat, the protagonist of *Steps* instantly flies into action. He seems convinced that neglecting to do so could prove fatal. Even the young boy of *The Painted Bird* is aware of "the importance of choosing to act" rather than simply having his fate dictated to him. (Lupack 1988, 92) Like most of Kosinski's future protagonists, the boy accepts victimization as an inevitable part of life. In *Steps*, men are badly beaten and maimed over card games, while others die in illegal drag races, and the protagonist himself is unexpectedly forced to murder a complete stranger. The novel functions as an admonition: yielding one's "individuality to the control of another" can never end well. (Everman 1991, 49) Near the beginning of *Steps*, the protagonist makes this mistake—allowing others to determine his fate—and is left starving, having to perform sexual favours for food. Why would Kosinski include such an incident in *Steps*? The reader watches as the protagonist, taking almost balletic steps, learns to bounce "through the anarchy of cruelty, barbarism, [and] appetites, which constitute modern life." (Karl 1983, 405) He will not allow others to define him.

The Washington Post's Henry Allen argues that the boy's experience in the war taught him "that instead of letting the world create his reality, he must create his own reality." (Allen 1971, B6) In *Steps*, this reality creation is taken a 'step' further. In a precise and clinical manner, the protagonist begins to probe boundaries. "He explores horror and outrage with the cool calculation of a research scientist, in which the givens of the experiment are the random circumstances in which he finds himself." (Fremont-Smith

1968, 45) The protagonist realizes that his talent for manipulating the other character's perceptions is by far the most potent weapon in his arsenal. Nearly at will, he may reinvent himself and compel others to see him in a new way. His talent makes him invincible, larger than life. The fact that this manipulation of perception is a kind of fraud or cheat, at least as concerns the other characters, is of no consequence to the protagonist. "His concerns are intellectual, abstract, esthetic, mechanical; he recognizes moral consequences, but is wholly uninterested in moral qualifications and judgment." (Fremont-Smith 1968, 45) As he makes his way through the world, he is able to create a kind of distortion field that baffles those he wishes to know better. In *The Art of the Self*, Kosinski defines hell as "the inability to escape from others who prove and prove again to you that you are as they see you." (The Art of the Self, 239) In this conflict over the nature of perception, the protagonist is determined that his vision of himself will ultimately triumph.

b) Manipulating Perception

Near the middle of *Steps*, the protagonist begins another adventure with the following description: "No one was able to claim the privilege of being her boy friend; she refused to have a steady companion. Admired, she was never possessed." (Steps, 77) As with the earlier discussion of "the man at the university who had wronged" him, (Steps, 37) it is clear that this situation will not be allowed to stand. The protagonist is now going to take matters into his own hands. Though she refuses to have a relationship, the protagonist notices that she has a fixation on her body. After finding a series of nude photographs of the woman (which she took herself), the protagonist appropriates several of them. He now has the capacity to make others believe that the woman is his lover. This is the ultimate experiment in *Steps*, because it is only perception that changes; in actual fact, nothing else has. There remains no relationship between the two, yet when the woman

dies suddenly (in what may or may not have been a suicide), everyone instantly assumes the worst. Fellow students at the university ostracize the protagonist, believing he abandoned the woman after impregnating her. The experiment reaches its apex at the funeral, when the woman's father spits into the protagonist's face. At this stage, the truth no longer matters. Rather, the series of events which the protagonist set in motion with the theft of the woman's pictures has now come full circle. He will always be remembered as her boyfriend. In the minds of the mourners, this fictional relationship has now been ascribed the status of fact. The actual reason for the woman's suicide, "which probably was related in some way to her neurotic self-absorption," (Lavers 1982, 65) may never be known.

According to Martin Tucker, *Steps* is "about the naming of people, or rather the putting into words and names the perceptions the hero has studiously cultivated. In this sense the novel is about the identity—and identities—of human beings; conversely, it is about the significance most people deny to another's identity." (Tucker 1968, 319) Victimization begins with this simple act of denial, the pretension that everyone else is invisible. To the protagonist of *Steps*, there is something frustratingly inaccessible about people. Their motivations are hidden. Others repel him, yet at the same time also stimulate his curiosity to know more. This causes the protagonist to fear and then lash out at others. He is aware that what lies inside each man, what each person is truly capable of in the right circumstances, is more shocking than anything to which he might have been subjected as a child. After the protagonist confronts the village priest for failing to come to the aid of the caged woman, he is more persuaded than ever that oppression is omnipresent. Knowledge of his own personality then, as well as fear of the unknown, compels the protagonist to beat others to the punch, cutting himself off from them before they can abandon him. While he chips paint from the hulls of ships, the protagonist's daydream is quite telling:

> The ship's portholes were dark; every time I peered into one of them I longed to be inside the cabin that lay behind. I longed to be the only passenger on that deserted ship, protected all about by steel walls, able to sleep and then awaken to some faraway sea, my identity gone, my destination uncharted. (Steps, 112-113)

Whether in Eastern Europe or America, his wish remains the same: to escape from society. At the very heart of his belief system, and further compounding his feeling of detachment, is the fear that he may again be victimized, if he does not himself become an oppressor. Ivan Sanders argues that Kosinski's novels are about men who see "human interaction as an essentially one-sided affair, where the aim above all is to master a situation, to understand, to control, to possess experience—visually, verbally, if not always physically." (Sanders 1974, 172) This is the inherent contradiction of the Kosinskian man: his need for intense interaction is superseded by his incapacity to let down his guard. He needs to dominate every exchange. In essence, he sabotages his own ability to connect with others, eventually driving them away. Filled with rage and self-loathing, the protagonist feels perpetually unfulfilled. He cannot share with others, but instead attempts to dominate every relationship in which he finds himself. Ultimately, his childhood survival experience is a miasma, following him through life and sabotaging his capacity to love. As an adult, his interactions with others have no palliative effect since he cannot subdue his mistrust of the hidden motivations each man carries within his heart. In the absence of other data, he assumes that others also see him as an object, so he must see them similarly, if only to protect himself. Despite his admonitions to the village priest, the protagonist also knows that he too is capable of sadism and cruelty. Upon seeing the nude woman in the cage, he reports that he was "very tempted" by the situation of her imprisonment. (Steps, 85) It is only her dementia (and incapacity to acknowledge her victimization), and not any overriding moral concerns, which prevents him from acting on his desire.

In *The Painted Bird* and *Steps*, perception is continually portrayed as being in a state of flux. While accompanying Mitka on his mission of revenge against the villagers, the boy spots a big dog, reminiscent of Judas (a particularly vicious animal with which Garbos used to torment him). When the boy asks Mitka to kill the animal, the Soviet sniper is taken aback. He considers it immoral to kill a dog without provocation. The disapproval with which he reacts indicates that he may not be entirely aware of what the boy has been through during the war. He is shocked that the boy does not see the dog as essentially harmless. The irony here is that Mitka treats animals with far more respect than humans. In the end, the boy's wartime experiences are reinforced: he will continue to view others as potential enemies. Nevertheless, Mitka makes him reevaluate his beliefs: canines cannot be enemies because their intentions are not covert. It is their owners who pose a potential threat.

In *Steps*, the protagonist learns how to manipulate other people's perceptions to his advantage in order to get what he wants. When the protagonist is asked to help coerce a third party into an illegal business partnership, he makes use of the fact that they are originally from the same country. Angered by the protagonist's attempt to blackmail and threaten his family, the man threatens to summon the police. The protagonist, however, turns the tables on the man, reminding him how "during the last war his paralyzed wife had been helped onto a train headed for a concentration camp" by "young and willing and neatly uniformed" strangers. (Steps, 116) The protagonist's inference is clear: the police owe the man nothing and could just as easily victimize as help him. The protagonist knows that he does not have to alter the other man's perceptions very much in order to convince him of what he already knows so well: others are capable of extreme cruelty. The next day, the man agrees to the new partnership. Once again, the protagonist has successfully accomplished his task.

c) Extreme Alienation

While still a small child, the protagonist of *The Painted Bird* encounters hatred for the first time. He is different from those around him and they will never permit him to forget this.

> No one wanted to keep me. Food was scarce and every mouth was a burden to feed. Besides, there was no work for me to do. One could not even clear manure out of barns which were banked up to the eaves by snow. People shared their shelter with hens, calves, rabbits, pigs, goats, and horses, men and animals warming each other with the heat of their bodies. But there was no room for me. (PB, 79)

He is profoundly alienated. "Like the painted bird, the boy never shares in the comfort or the safety of the flock." (Lupack 1988, 81) Instead, he turns inward, consumed by suspicion and hatred. The boy is a fugitive, "who fears more than welcomes each new day, [and] who sees not the promise of the sun, but feels the threat of storm." (Notes of the Author, 16) As he moves through life, the boy deliberately repudiates every link to the collective. The only way he can protect himself is to cut himself off from others before they reject him. "This feeling of alienation floats on the surface of the work" and only grows in intensity after the boy loses his capacity to speak. (Notes of the Author, 17) The boy portrayed in *The Painted Bird* is totally shut off from the world around him. But it is important to acknowledge that he is different from the Kosinskian man who emerges in *Steps* (and beyond); unlike the other protagonists, who remain outsiders by choice, the nameless boy of *The Painted Bird* is transformed into one against his will. (Lupack 1988, 89) This extraordinarily troubled child is ravenous for affection, friendship, compassion and trust, since he is aware that they could heal his emotional wounds, but he is also realistic: the possibility of his receiving this emollient is growing dimmer with each passing day.

> To him the world is merely a forgotten bunker where the rats murder one another without hope of escape. For this world he feels only boundless contempt and hate; and the shadow of this contempt will lengthen as the Boy grows... (Notes of the Author, 28)

According to David Evanier, Kosinski's first novel is reminiscent of Jakov Lind's "Soul of Wood" insofar as it "takes place outside the concentration camp, and yet conceives the outer world as insane, destructive and unchangeable—in fact, a potential concentration camp itself." (Evanier 1966, 422) In *Steps*, Kosinski commingles this exigent ambience with a representation of American life as also being perilous to the individual. Though not a police state by any stretch of the imagination, the protagonist perceives his adopted home as an unrelentingly tedious and culturally barren habitat. In its way, it also stamps out individualism, albeit through different methods than the Total State: the mindless banality of television, ubiquitous advertising, a stale political culture and a news media controlled by a handful of corporations. Only too acutely aware of its shortcomings, the Kosinskian man is no apologist for the American consumer culture: on the contrary, he has deep-seated reservations about this alien land. Nevertheless, he has no other viable options, so he plunges headlong into American life. As has already been discussed, he does not completely fit in anywhere. He may wish to reengage, but his knowledge of the savagery of which men are capable will always subvert his capacity to sympathize with or connect with others. He may have crossed an ocean, but he cannot hide from his own nightmares: the Holocaust will continue to haunt him regardless of where he travels.

Even a few pages into *Steps*, the motivation of the Kosinskian man has been well established, so it is no accident that there is virtually no mention of the protagonist's family in *Steps*. This seems a logical extension of the boy's detachment from his parents and stepbrother in *The Painted Bird*. The protagonist must make his way through life alone: relating to others is now an impossibility. It seems fitting that none of the

characters in *Steps* are given proper names. For the Kosinskian man, the entire human race has become interchangeable. Since the narrator of *Steps* does not even disclose his own name (nor even select one arbitrarily, as Tarden does in *Cockpit*) it is possible that there is a sense of self-loathing at work here. The protagonist cannot now form the kinds of connections which are necessary to "pull his experience of the world, or himself, into coherence." (Sloan 1996, 258) Instead, his experience will always be that of the outsider. He merely goes "through the motions of being a living being." (Sloan 1996, 258) There can be no give and take between the characters, in any usual sense, since others are merely a means to an end for the protagonist. In his discussion of *Steps*, Irving Howe characterizes this process as "a gradual stripping or destruction of social personality as it is enforced by the pressures of social experience. (Howe 1969, 104)

Unfortunately, this stripping away may leave some people out of touch with reality. For example, the protagonist is invited to a party by a seemingly sophisticated older gentleman. The man admonishes the protagonist, however, that at the get-together, he will be responsible for entertaining himself. (Steps, 96) This statement rouses the protagonist's curiosity. When he arrives at the man's apartment, all he finds are old pictures of a woman glued to the walls of a bedroom. The room has the atmosphere of a masturbatory shrine, thus explaining the man's cryptic reference to pleasing oneself. The protagonist does not seem particularly surprised by this incident. Aside from providing an interesting anecdote for him to recount, this affair does not much interest him: he understands that the lonely man's aggressive fantasy life is a response to the vacuity of his existence. Like the protagonist, he may have suffered a trauma which exacerbated his feelings of worthlessness and made his interactions with others seem unrewarding. As a result, he chooses to escape into the world of his imagination, where he can set the rules. His estrangement from reality is so extreme that when he actually attempts to share his delusion with the protagonist, he is not rebuffed, as might be expected. In the end, the

protagonist walks out of the man's apartment without comment. This act is about as close as the Kosinskian man can come to sympathy. The old man is left alone because he is a figure of pity; like the caged woman, he is so out of touch with the world that it would not be sporting to take advantage of him.

On another level, the protagonist knows what it is like to be so benumbed by life that he needs to deliberately manufacture intensity. This leads to a "clinical detachment" as the protagonist struggles with his "continuing inability to find requital." (McAleer 1968, 316) According to David H. Richter, Kosinski's first novel is especially effective insofar as it simultaneously muffles the reader's sensations at the same time as the protagonist himself is closing down his connection to the outside world. (Richter 1974, 373) Kosinski's "flat, uncommitted style" effectively conveys the idea of complete emotional detachment. (Everman 1991, 30) The atmosphere of *Steps* is similar. After some episodes, the reader is left with the impression that the narrator is so disconnected that he is deliberately testing limits, both his own and the other characters'. For example, after the protagonist's girlfriend is gang raped by some hoodlums, he begins to change. He deliberately forces himself upon her, making love violently and in ways to which he knows she will take offense. He toys with and abuses her emotions and experiments to see how completely he can control her behaviour. He also convinces her to accept the advances of a lesbian neighbor so that he can create a three-way relationship in which he controls both women. While this undoubtedly fulfills his fantasies, it does not even pretend to take the woman's needs or desires into consideration. When he wishes to go to a party without her, she becomes resentful. The protagonist decides to punish her by inviting her along and then literally giving her away, as a gift, to a room full of his friends. This is the ultimate act of objectification, since she has become a living gratuity. The protagonist is experimenting with the woman's personal boundaries, as he redefines her identity. When she begins to resist him, he grows more determined, wishing to replace her persona with one of his own

choosing. The protagonist is still fighting his old battle, for total control. In the end, he cannot help himself; transforming her into an object was simply too easy and too tempting. Ironically, for the one and only time, the protagonist has no specific ulterior motive. He victimizes the woman merely because he can.

There is an ominous quality to this scene because it unfolds very rapidly, over only a few pages, and because it does not really end, so much as it simply fades away. The last image is of the crowd, in a frenzy, picking the woman up and carrying her away to the bedroom. Almost as an afterthought, the narrator mentions that her strand of pearls, a gift from him, has broken and spilled onto the floor.

> "The tiny iridescent seeds cascaded down, lost now in the swaying, heaving rush that carried her toward the bedroom. (Steps, 58)

His bond to the woman now permanently broken, he leaves the party alone. What happens to her, indeed, whether she survives this second ordeal at all, is of no further interest to the protagonist. The reader is left to wonder, on behalf of a narrator who is too disconnected even to feign interest, what becomes of the woman. This story, like the rest of *Steps,* is deliberately assembled out of tiny scraps of memory and experience. This loose configuration of fragments is surprisingly durable and allows Kosinski to "suggest the actions of a life." (Boyers 1972, 43) *Steps* is not overly concerned with matters like dates, times, places or even proper names.[19] Instead, "the stories follow each other as memories do, triggered by association and by theme, not by temporal order." (Everman 1991, 47) As in day-to-day life, there is no unified plot in *Steps*. The episodes are just chunks of the protagonist's memory, mixed together and redefined over the passage of

[19]What chronological organization it does have is relatively simple: the first half of the novel seems to be taking place in Europe, while the second half appears to be a memoir of the protagonist's experiences living in America. Within this structure, however, the time frame fluctuates wildly from one episode to another.

time. *Steps* thus begins where *The Painted Bird's* loose structure leaves off, the second novel impelling "the episodic form...to its formal limits." (Everman 1991, 47)

d) The Fragmented Structure of *Steps*

Steps, like so much of Kosinski's other work, presents a series of random episodes. To Kosinski, life itself is episodic, "without coherence, without obvious overall meaning—without plot." (Sloan 1996, 241) While the protagonist is busy attempting to discover his identity on the basis of these disconnected vignettes, the reader is also conscripted to extract meaning from the chaotic non-structure of this novel. It is left to the reader to discover how best to reorder the manifold and disparate fragments, in order to fully appreciate the nature of the protagonist's struggle to remain an individual. (Boyers, 1972, 54) What emerges from *Steps* is a new kind of multi-faceted and evolving protagonist who never remains one thing for very long. There is no "coherent whole but a collection of fragmentary selves." (Everman 1991, 53) Barbara Tepa Lupack concludes that "in *Steps*, form is content: the shattering of conventional narrative provides a clear parallel to the shattered self and the chaos and fragmentation caused by modern society." (Lupack, 1988, p. 114) Freed from the constraint of traditional plot, Kosinski can more easily reflect the world as he sees it. According to James D. Hutchinson, different episodes in the novel may strike the reader as ambiguous and pointless. (Hutchinson 1969, 129) This is because Kosinski is fascinated by how and why people remember various parts of their lives. To him, individual events have little significance, unless viewed within a broader context. He is more interested in "the total aesthetic response to experiences as they become lodged in the complex subconscious of a character." (Hutchinson 1969, 129)

In *Steps*, the protagonist's motivations are easily accessible: in the space of only a few pages, he goes from being a child to an adult, from a soldier to a civilian, from a victim to an oppressor and then back again. Already familiar with the decisive man the protagonist eventually becomes, it is instructive for the reader to be able to flash back to see his life behind the Iron Curtain. For example, as a young student, he is banished to an agricultural settlement, ostensibly because he has fallen out of favour with the Party apparatus which controls the student union. The people in the settlement also distrust the protagonist, convinced he is a spy. No one dares befriend him: he is forced to subsist in isolation. One day, he meets an acrobat with a traveling circus. Alone together in the forest, the acrobat proves enormously pliant, contorting her body in unusual ways. This sexual performance, within the context of *Steps*, has a "subversive political dimension." (Lilly 1988, 41) Since the protagonist goes to the settlement to relearn his place within society, his sexual liaison might be interpreted as a form of political dissidence. The narrator and the acrobat have "withdraw[n] from the shared values of the collective." (Lilly 1988, 46) The scene ends with the phrase: "She brushed against my face her mouth and womb." (Steps, 77) Though the womb usually connotes a reproductive function, Kosinski has deliberately subverted its meaning in order to sharpen the reader's awareness of what is occurring. "The womb becomes a mouth, brushing not just against the face of the narrator but against his imagination." (Lilly 1988, 53)

This sort of subversion of meaning takes place throughout *Steps*. One example is Kosinski's use of books as a symbol for where the protagonist stands in relation to American society. While the presence of books may traditionally be utilized to indicate knowledge, Kosinski forces the reader to question this notion. When the protagonist disembarks from the plane that has carried him to America, he still has the mentality of a victim. As he is leaving the airport, his suitcase bursts apart, spewing dictionaries all over the floor. People laugh at his misfortune. It is as though his baggage has betrayed how far

he still has to go in order to gain control of his life. Until he masters a strange new language, he will continue to be victimized. Later in the novel, after he has begun to exercise control of his life, he successfully participates in the book knock-off game. His "steps toward this language of power are marked with fragments of the printed word." (Lilly 1988, 51) These two vignettes, when juxtaposed against one another, illustrate the importance that the narrator attaches to being in control. The books he knocks off the automobiles are a metaphor for the control he now exercises over his life.

According to Norman Lavers, each of the different scenes in *Steps* is designed to stand on its own and does not need to be arranged in any specific order. Clearly, *The Painted Bird* does not function in this way: each ordeal to which the boy is subjected builds on the nightmares which preceded it. In contrast, each episode in *Steps* provides a greater appreciation for how the narrator has evolved from victim to victimizer, but no one episode in the book is indispensable. One memory triggers another and so on, so what ultimately matters is which experiences have been included in the novel. Each separate story (as well as the running conversation) works to synthesize the feeling that the reader is watching a mind recount the experiences of a lifetime, from adult, to student, to photographer, to child, to immigrant, to stunt driver, to paint chipper, to mute handyman, to ultimate survivor. "The narrator is different at different times in his life and in different situations. He is a collection of fragmentary selves, bound together by his body but neither unified nor coherent. He is not even held together by a name." (Everman 1991, 50) In *The Art of the Self*, Kosinski defines his narrator as a kaleidoscopic composite of disparate memories. (The Art of the Self, 240) This is a fitting metaphor since there is an enormously visual element to Kosinski's novels.

In *The Art of the Self*, Kosinski writes that "montage reflects the modern thought process" and that "the cinematic image has become the key to modern perception." (The Art of the

Self, 225) Kosinski's supposition is that experiences, once they have occurred, are transformed into mere fragments of memory. Events are remembered as people believe they occurred (or as they wished they had occurred), with no regard for the chronology or even veracity of the episodes themselves. Thus "the remembered event becomes a fiction, a structure made to accommodate certain feelings." (Notes of the Author, 11) Just as much of the violence in Stanley Kubrick's movie version of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) is choreographed violence, a veritable ballet of rape and cruelty, so too does each episode of *Steps* have a vital visual dimension.[20] Reading *Steps* is much like flipping through a photo album: in some shots, the protagonist is pictured with his various friends and lovers, while in others he wears the uniform of the various jobs he has held, and in still others he is pictured playing book knock-off or spying on his neighbors or making love to a tubercular patient in a mirror. Frederick Karl explains that "the dimensions of *Steps* are the worlds of the photographer, snapping at each act of imbecility, bestiality, self-indulgence, as it passes before his camera." (Karl 1983, 405) Though this series of metaphorical snapshots and self-portraits, a life emerges. It is important to remember, however, that photographs can be faked and that photographers sometimes miss the picture that they wish to capture. The camera may lie inasmuch as what is lurking in the shadows: motivations, dreams and intentions, often remain frustratingly outside the frame of the picture.

This critique, of the self as montage, permits the reader to see a single protagonist whereas the book as a whole presents a myriad of different protagonists, each one in a slightly different phase of personal development. (Sherwin 1981, 24) The collage of fragments works together to build a total protagonist. Ultimately, *Steps* is about the stages the protagonist grows through in the course of his life. "Without steps, the narrator, either youthful or older, would be only victim; whereas with steps, he can

[20] At one point, the protagonist reveals that he is an award-winning photographer. (Steps, 47)

command his own presence, counterattack, and above all, observe." (Karl 1983, 405) John W. Aldridge argues that *Steps* is "an essentially cinematic novel...composed of experience or splinters of consciousness." (Aldridge 1971, 25) The reader must sort through and make sense of this collage of memory. One way to accomplish this end is to reexamine the way in which *The Painted Bird* and *Steps* are similar. According to Albert J. Guerard, Kosinski's first novel is unique because it successfully intermingles reality (a child separated from his family during the war), fantasy-wish fulfillment (the train derailment), horror (the rats eating the carpenter alive) and dreams (or perhaps more accurately nightmares, such as the immersion in the excrement pit). (Guerard 1974, 34) *Steps* shares many of these features—intermixing reality (the protagonist's job parking cars), fantasies (the sexual encounter with the contortionist), horror (the naked woman in the cage) and nightmare imagery (a nurse copulating with some sort of simian-like creature)—but in the second novel, Kosinski's episodic style begins to become what the book is about. In other words, the fragments are "the glue which hold[s] the collage of the portraits of the self together." (Sherwin 1981, 24) Norman Lavers asserts that Kosinski's radical departure from traditional plot structure, which evolves rapidly from *The Painted Bird* to *Steps*, created a problem, at least of perception. (Lavers 1982, 71) His basic point here is that Kosinski's episode-centered method could only be original once.

After *Steps*, this method would not be as effective because it would not as expeditiously cast doubt on the reader's established sensibilities. Ultimately, Lavers is correct, and any discussion of Kosinski's work as a whole would have to concede this point. Nevertheless, it is a matter of how this data is interpreted: precisely what interests the reader about Kosinski's novels is the alienation and detachment of his protagonists. Their plight, as hollow men, struggling to reengage with society, drags the reader's attention to the episodes of their lives. Clearly, they do have similarities to one another, such as their determination not to become victims, but this does not diminish their importance; on the

contrary, the recognizable nature of the Kosinskian protagonist (and the distinctive tone and structure of the novels in which he appears) is one of the reasons that this work is so significant.[21] The boy, Tarden, Levanter, Fabian, Domostroy and the nameless protagonist of *Steps* are all Kosinskian heroes, making their way through a post-Holocaust world. Kosinski's work is consequential precisely because of how his protagonists deal with their victimization. The similarities between these characters presents a unique opportunity to observe the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) ways in which they grow and change. Just as this chapter has postulated that *The Painted Bird* may aid the reader's appreciation for *Steps*, so the subsequent books grow out of the innovative structure that Kosinski utilized in creating *Steps*. By consulting Kosinski's different novels, the reader may check in with a version of the Kosinskian man as he continues on through life, moving progressively further away from the boy he had once been.

e) The Conversation

Of the fragments that comprise *Steps*, the most mysterious and yet indispensable are the italicized snippets of conversation, between a man and a woman, which are scattered throughout the text. What was Kosinski attempting when he decided to intersperse them, at various points, throughout *Steps*? These twelve snatches of dialogue are "fragments from an ongoing relationship between the narrator and the woman on whom he imposes a variety of controls." (Lilly 1988, 49) According to Barbara Tepa Lupack, these fragments "chronicle the progressive developments in the relationship between the two." (Lupack 1988, 128) The banter between them is all of a type: worldly and adult, filled with astute

[21] The reader should keep in mind that each novel is a representation of where Kosinski stood in his life at a given moment. These protagonists are not Kosinski himself, of course, but they are versions of him. Hence, they have pronounced differences, depending on what informed the writing of a given novel at a specific moment.

observations about the world around them, but tempered by a carefree atmosphere. To an extent, the two already know one another, but they are getting to know one another even better through their discussion. The implication is that the two are speaking in the giddy moments after intercourse. The time frame of the discussion, however, remains murky: it is unclear whether only one night has elapsed. Near the end of the novel, after the protagonist has abruptly departed, it is revealed that the two were staying together in a hotel by the sea. This comes as something of a shock because up to this point the setting is left quite vague. The repartee between the two does not really foreshadow the narrator's disappearance, yet after he is gone, it seems clear that their relationship (ended by his abrupt departure) is now just another part of his ongoing journey. The conversation itself might thus be viewed as just one more episode, though it is spread out throughout *Steps*.

Robert Boyers argues that these fragments of dialogue add a certain intensity or urgency to *Steps*. (Boyers 1972, 57) This structure permits Kosinski, in the voice of his protagonist, to talk about matters he otherwise would not have had the opportunity to discourse upon.[22] For example, the lovers discuss an architect of the protagonist's acquaintance, who was responsible for creating prototypes of the concentration camps. This provides the protagonist with an occasion to discuss the philosophical underpinnings of the camps. Since the architect had never previously visited such a place, his blueprints required "exceptional vision." (Steps, 63) His primary goal is to obfuscate the true nature of the camp, while striving to create an environment which stresses hygiene.

> Rats aren't murdered—we get rid of them; or to use a better word, they are eliminated; this act of elimination is empty of all meaning. There's no ritual in it, no symbolism; the right of the executioner is never questioned. That's why in

[22]Discussion with Musia Schwartz about the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, Montreal, 10 June 1998.

> the concentration camps my friend designed, the victims never remained individuals; they become as identical as rats. They existed only to be killed. (Steps, 64)

Kosinski uses these bits of conversation to shock the reader's sensibilities. At the same time, the protagonist is doing the same to the woman's sense of self-awareness. In their exchanges, he plays with words in order to create a particular effect. His seeming detachment from the discussion of the camps is but one example. What he seems to be trying to do is "season her perspective." (Bruss 1981, 192) There is a parental (or perhaps more accurately a didactic) aspect to their relationship in which he attempts to overthrow her existing values, which he sees as cliché and prosaic, and replace them with a more sophisticated and worldly view. After their encounter, the protagonist hopes that "she will simply be unable to return to the easy sentimentality of her past." (Bruss 1981, 194) The woman's sentimentalized view of language, for the protagonist, is an abomination. He fears that she will not reach full intellectual maturation until she realizes that these views unnecessarily circumscribe her understanding of human interaction. For this reason, he deliberately engages her in discussions of taboo topics. For example, when she dismisses the idea of making love during her period, he refuses to allow the discussion to conclude. He insists:

> I want to make love to you when you're menstruating. It's as though a part of me were caught in you and your blood were mine, pulsing out from a vein that belongs to us both. What do you feel then? (Steps, 53)

The woman's answer is telling.

> I feel the blood staining our bodies as if your hardness made me bleed, as if you had flayed my skin, and had eaten me, and I was drained. (Steps, 53)

Here he is deliberately working to demystify and corrupt the ideals that she has always held but never thought to challenge. The woman seems to be playing along, almost role playing, answering when prompted with what she thinks he wishes to hear. But this way of thinking can be infectious: as the conversation continues on, her way of expressing her thoughts begins to resemble the protagonist's. He has profoundly influenced her way of thinking. Throughout the course of *Steps*, the woman undergoes an enormous transition from naivety to sophistication. In her first exchange with the man, she sheepishly asks him whether or not he is circumcised. This is a particularly odd query and strongly implies that she has little or no previous knowledge of the male anatomy. Simply put, she should already know this information. At this stage, she is oblivious to much of what is going on around her. As she continues to ruminate on the significance of circumcision, the reader cannot help being struck by the platitudinous nature of her views, almost as if she is reading them out of a popular lifestyle magazine.

> Today, it seems so cruel and unnecessary; a part of an infant's body is removed without his consent! Isn't it possible that as a result of mutilating him, the man becomes less sensitive and responsive? After all, a delicate organ that nature intended to be covered and kept tender becomes exposed, and almost like one's knees and elbows, is constantly chafed by the linen, wool, and cotton one wears....(Steps, 31)

In another fragment of dialogue, they discuss her childhood aversion to the idea of performing fellatio.

> I was taught that if a woman did it, some dreadful punishment, a foul disease or a deformity, would befall her: some of my friends claimed the taste of it was horrible, oily, slimy, lumpy...and besides, it was degrading, almost like eating living flesh. (Steps, 83)

She attributes these childhood views to her Catholic education and then contrasts them with her current views, by describing her passion for going down on her partners.

> It's as if the entire body of the man, everything, had suddenly shrunk into this one thing. And then it grows and fills the mouth. It becomes forceful, but at the same time remains frail and vulnerable. It could choke me—or I might bite it off. And as it grows, it is I who give it life; my breathing sustains it, and it uncoils like an enormous tongue. I loved what was ejected from you: like hot wax, it was suddenly melting all over me, over my neck and breasts and stomach. I felt as though I were being christened: it was so white and pure. (Steps, 83-84)

By this point, the woman has figured out what is required of her. In the above discussion, there is an attempt to conflate "the images of mating and eating, sperm and food." (Lilly 1988, 54) By depicting fellatio as a quasi-religious experience, she demonstrates that she is beginning to feel less constrained by her upbringing. At the same time, she is studying the protagonist's behaviour, trying to learn exactly what he expects of her. This is increasingly difficult, because he always manages to stay one step ahead of her, probing to see whether she is actually growing less dependent on clichés and sentimentality or if she is merely parroting what he has already said. What is actually being measured here is the nature and depth of her love. The narrator cannot help himself; he needs to test her loyalty. For example, when she is getting a massage, the protagonist arranges for the masseur to touch her in a sexual manner. When he finds out that she did not object to the masseur's advances, the narrator confronts her. The woman tries to defuse the situation by cleverly arguing that (at least symbolically) the masseur's advances, arranged and paid for by the protagonist, are actually extensions of the protagonist's own body. (Steps, 42) This mollifies the narrator, for a moment, but it is clear that he will not allow this to be the final word. He has the woman followed by a private detective and he learns that she has been sleeping with another man. It is unclear how the protagonist views her infidelity.

Acting on a sexual impulse might be viewed as "breaking away from the constrictions of her past," but the narrator is concerned by her reluctance to come clean on the matter. (Bruss 1981, 192) She is falling back into her old patterns of thought. The truth has to be dragged out of her. She admits that she has met a new man, but she neglects to mention that they have engaged in sexual intercourse. At this point, she borrows the protagonist's vocabulary. She states, "I felt I had an obligation to know myself better—apart from the self you have brought me to know." (Steps, 43)

Two pages later, when he announces that he had her followed by a detective and that he knows that she has been with another man, she struggles with the truth.

> I don't deny it, but an act of intercourse is not a commitment unless it stems from a particular emotion and a certain frame of mind. It wasn't an act based on love; but I had to make sure, in order to discover myself, whether it would lead to love. (Steps, 45)

This kind of sophistry is surely worthy of the narrator himself. She tries to have it both ways, to live a lie and when discovered, argue that the lie lacked any meaningful consequence. The relationship has become something "lifeless and perverse and deceitful." (Wolff 1968, 18) The narrator is also guilty of employing elaborate wordplay in order to cover the truth. When the woman inquires whether he has been with a prostitute during their relationship, he equivocates, maintaining that this makes no difference. He argues that sex with the prostitute somehow preserves the integrity of the self he has created for the woman. Again, this entire discussion is a kind of word game. In the end, the protagonist is every bit as disingenuous as the woman. "For each then, the relationship consists of mutual testing, judgment, and analysis that expands their perceptions of themselves and of their attitudes toward each other." (Lilly 1988, 49)

The protagonist remains confident that he knows how best to circumvent the "trap of predictability." (Lilly 1988, 50) The woman, however, fears that she is merely becoming a stage on which the protagonist may project and view himself. (Steps, 132) She is correct in her assessment, that the protagonist's need to control her life is authorial in nature. (Lilly 1988, 49) He has spent most of the novel recounting life-dramas, all of his own making, which are designed to inspire fear and awe in both the woman and the reader. Now the woman finds that she has become a character in one of them. And based on the stories he has told her, she is aware that her interaction with him will probably not end happily. In the last vignette in the book (though it is technically not a dialogue), Kosinski abruptly switches into the third person. The protagonist has vanished. Though the reason for his sudden disappearance is never revealed, it is possible that he felt he had completed his work, at least in terms of the story. To appear in the final scene would be to overstay his welcome. He knows his abrupt and inexplicable departure will shock the woman and cause her to reevaluate her priorities. His termination of their relationship is just another way of shocking the woman, while simultaneously reasserting his dominance over her. (Lilly 1988, 43) In the final paragraph of *Steps*, the woman undresses and enters the ocean. It is unclear whether she intends to drown herself or simply continue on without the protagonist.

Though the dialogues consist only of tiny fragments, what is "truly remarkable is the sense we have, from the brief fragments, of thoroughly articulated personalities." (Boyers 1972, 58) Kosinski's interpretation of conversation, which usually consists of huge chunks of compelling monologue, bears little or no resemblance to how people actually speak. As Welsh Everman remarks, this dialogue is not even interspersed with "he said's and she said's." (Everman 1991, 48) Somehow, the work does not suffer and successfully "chronicles "the progressive developments in the relationship between the two." (Lupack 1988, 128) The nature of their sophisticated pillow talk gives *Steps* a unique timeless

quality, because such interactions between men and women will not grow less abundant with the passage of time. At one point, early in *Steps*, the woman recounts an interesting incident:

> Once, when we were buying a coat for me, the salesman came over to help me try it on. When he put his hand on my neck to adjust the collar, you came up to him and without a word took his hand and removed it—just as though it were an object. You must have squeezed his hand terribly hard: he froze. His face was almost purple and his mouth opened as if he was going to cry. (Steps, 33)

From this incident, the woman deduces something about the protagonist: that he will do whatever is necessary to protect his interests. Once again, he desires control. When the woman protests that the salesman did not "mean to be personal," the protagonist retorts, "I don't know what he meant and you don't either." (Steps, 33) He instinctively views others with suspicion. They are rivals. He cannot conceive that the salesman's gesture was not an intentional attempt to initiate intimacy—because this is exactly the sort of thing that the protagonist would do. The fragment of conversation ends with the woman asking him if he could kill a man. His answer, that he does not know, is very ominous and foreshadows the way in which the protagonist, at the end of the novel, is forced to execute another man. The incident with the salesman is instructive in that it allows an appreciation for the protagonist's unique perspective: every interaction with another person, for him, is a kind of game. This applies to his ongoing conversation with the woman every bit as much as it applies to the game of intimidation with the salesman. The protagonist is not a particularly good loser and so he approaches games (both real and metaphorical) with a ferocious desire to emerge triumphal. To him, victory is the preeminent form of control.

SECTION III - THE NATURE OF OBSESSION

a) The Gaming Motif

Both *The Painted Bird* and *Steps* are books which delve into the nature of obsession. The protagonist of *Steps* is never sedate: his isolation and deliberate disconnection from others defines him. Although survival is his primary interest, he often takes enormous risks in order to advance his own interests. On occasion, his need to control and dominate others takes the form of gambling with his own life and playing games with others. It is important to remember that although this occurs a great deal in *Steps*, it first occurs in *The Painted Bird*. While living with a farmer named Garbos, the boy undergoes an unbelievably frightening experience. Inside Garbos' house and unbeknownst to the peasants and the village priest, the boy wages a life and death struggle against a ferocious dog named Judas.

> Garbos would sometimes untie Judas, lead him only by the collar, and make him back me against the wall. The growling, sputtering mouth was only inches from my throat, and the animal's big body shook with savage fury. He nearly choked, frothing and spitting, while the man urged him on with hard words and sharp proddings. He came so close that his warm, moist breath dampened my face. At such moments life would almost pass out of me, and my blood would flow through my veins with a slow, sluggish drip, like heavy spring honey trickling through the narrow neck of a bottle. (PB, 123-124)

Much of the boy's time with Garbos is spent pondering why this man despises him with such ferocity. The answer may lie with the village priest, who appears several times during this episode. He is attempting to save the lives of Jewish and Gypsy children by stashing them with different families. Garbos does not wish to risk his own life to save

the boy's and as a result, grows to resent the child's presence in his house. One day, Garbos invents a new game whereby he leaves the boy hanging from two leather straps nailed into the ceiling while Judas is allowed to run loose below. To let go of the straps means certain death. Garbos forces the boy to play the game many times, but his grip never falters. Hanging from the straps, only milliseconds from a vicious dog attack, the boy learns to distract his mind from the pain in his arms and legs. Miraculously, no matter how many times Garbos forces him to play, he never loses. This scene is reminiscent of the book knock-off game, which the protagonist of *Steps* plays with such mastery. This sort of survival, inexplicably and against all odds, comes to define the boy and the Kosinskian protagonist he later becomes.

The Painted Bird is fundamentally a contest between the boy and a hardhearted world to see just how much more he can stand (as well as between Kosinski and his readers for exactly the same reason). Relentlessly, the boy is deprived of everything that makes life worth living: friends, parents, dignity, education, love, rest and quite frequently food and clothing. Everyone poses a threat to him at some point, from his various peasant-tormentors (including Makar who almost kills him with a kick to the stomach, Garbos and Judas and the carpenter), to the Nazis and later the Kalmuks. The boy's ignorance of how dire his situation actually is helps explain his survival. He resigns himself to his fate and never "curses the world itself or finds it unfair or unjust to him. He accepts it on its own terms..." (Lavers 1982, 48) For example, despite being twice handed over to the occupying Nazi army, he still manages to cheat death. The boy conceives of his life as an ordeal of survival. After a time, his instincts simply carry him through each calamity. After the war, in order to add some uncertainty to his life, the boy lies on the railway tracks as trains race over him. Again, he could just as easily have been killed, but somehow he survives.

According to Paul Bruss, the narrator of *Steps* possesses a "propensity for gaming." (Bruss 1981, 192) In Kosinski's second novel, this wish to participate in games takes several forms, including the protagonist's need to risk his life (to prove he is still in control), his affinity for jokes, tricks and mischief (to amuse himself and demonstrate his superiority over others), his desire to see if others are paying attention (or if they might inadvertently reveal something about their true nature) and his wish to intimidate and frighten others (with his originality and resourcefulness). With regard to this gaming motif, *Steps* has a much lighter atmosphere than *The Painted Bird.* For example, at a international Party gathering where dignitaries exchange national badges and pins as a sign of friendship, the protagonist watches as a disgruntled scientist (whose family had been wiped out during the purges) wanders through the ballroom, pinning shiny foreign made foil wrapped condoms to each of the guest's lapels. No one notices the scientist's trick until after the reception. The protagonist seems to admire this prank because the joke is outrageous, yet still manages to make an astute observation about the sterility of such formalized gatherings. (Bruss 1981, 186) The scientist's prank also raises question about the mental acuity of these Party functionaries.

The protagonist of *Steps* has a great need for games and play. The fragments of conversation are themselves a form of gaming. Through both word and deed, the man and the woman are pushing their relationship to its breaking point. At one point, he arranges for a masseur to make sexual overtures to her and later has her followed. The purpose of such behaviour is to determine whether the woman can be trusted to internalize the protagonist's own perspective. There are a number of similar incidents in *Steps*, where the protagonist seeks to deliberately play with perception. For example, he answers the phone while simultaneously engaging in intercourse with his girlfriend. Though it probably would have been easier not to take the call, the protagonist wants to see his girlfriend's reaction. As the reader might have suspected, she becomes infuriated with him.

One of his other games (essentially the opposite of the telephone answering scenario) is to pretend to be a deaf-mute. The people he meets invariably feel that he can be trusted (since he cannot tell anyone their secrets) so they reveal things about themselves which they would not otherwise share with anyone else. In this sense, the protagonist is spying on other people's true personalities. He has an obsession with knowing others completely, since he believes that they are probably hiding parts of themselves from him.

Byron L. Sherwin argues that in Kosinski's prose, "the failure of the individual to take risks imprisons that individual in the suffocating dungeon of the status quo." (Sherwin 1981, 35) As a result, the protagonist of *The Painted Bird* manufactures thrills, such as his death defying game under the train. (Lavers 1982, 40) In Kosinski's prose, the train stunt is significant because it is the first time that the boy's life is not endangered by others; instead, it is a risk which he voluntarily assumes. By this point, "the sole way the young boy can feel alive is by approaching ever closer to death." (Karl 1983, 153) Not knowing if he will survive the ordeal somehow energizes his psyche: his survival experience has been replicated in microcosm. The protagonist of *Steps* is similarly unafraid of taking chances. One of his first acts after leaving Eastern Europe is the theft of expensive foodstuffs from American supermarkets. He is aware of the danger: if he is caught, he may lose his job and be ineligible to stay in America, but he has come too far to be denied by a price tag. There is a ferocious determination to survive, whatever the danger. Of course, this is a small risk compared to his life, which he imperils for prize money every time he participates in the book knock-off competition. In that sense, the knock-off game in *Steps* serves a similar function to the train stunt in *The Painted Bird.* They are both dangerous and unnecessary risks, yet they help to define the respective protagonists: these two are prepared to wager everything, including their lives, in order to impress others and know more about themselves.

This exploration of his inner life lies at the heart of *Steps*. As a child, the protagonist recalls taking part in strange rituals, such as the butterfly survival game (in which he and his friends capture butterflies for the purpose of wagering on which ones will take longest to suffocate) and the spitting game (in which he is forced to endure a farmer spitting directly into his eyes). The protagonist counters by creating the fishhook game, in which he induces the farmer's child to swallow hooks and crushed glass hidden in pieces of raw dough. Vengeance is not the only topic that is turned into a game in *Steps*: sex is also treated as a sort of competition. In the "Knights of the Round Table" game, the narrator describes an unusual pastime in which many soldiers sit around a table with strings tied to their penises. One man, King Arthur, holds all the strings. By yanking firmly on different lines (without knowing whose organ is attached to which string) the men gamble on whose line is actually being pulled. The man who can go the longest without showing pain wins. Cheaters are punished by having their testicles crushed between rocks. Ironically, those who legitimately win at "Knights of the Round Table" are just as liable to be maimed. The purpose of the game is to control one's natural reaction to intense pain, just the type of macho activity to which the protagonist would be drawn. Yet again, this episode boils down to an issue of control. *Steps* has a number of parallel scenes running throughout it. In a particularly visual episode, a large group of men assemble in a barn to take part in an odd ritual; lying naked on their backs, "their feet joined at the center like the spokes of a wheel" one woman, most likely a prostitute, proceeds to service the entire room. (Steps, 139)

> One by one they fell back, like corpses laid out in shallow coffins. Now the barn looked as if it had been pressed into service for the dead and the dying from a derailed train. As she rose and walked around the silent men, the woman resembled a nurse checking the victims. (Steps, 139)

Because the protagonist is pretending to be mute, no one takes any notice of him. He describes the game as a sort of clinic for broken hearts. The woman's attentions towards these destitute men, from the fringes of society, allows them a few brief moments of peace, in which they can once again demonstrate their sexual virility. After having been beaten down by life, they seek validation as men. This scene plays out much like a silent movie. After she finishes off the last of the men, the protagonist reports no movement and no sound coming from the barn. The only noise is the splashing of water, as the woman washes her private parts after each coupling. As in so much of Kosinski's work, sex is presented more as a diversion or as a form of entertainment (or a spectator sport) than as an act of intimacy between people. This sequence is neither erotic nor sexy; indeed, there is very little in Kosinski's work as a whole which could properly be described in this way. The people in this second gang-bang sequence (the first occurs when he gives his girlfriend away to a roomful of men) act mechanically. To them, sex is a fact of biology, just like eating or sleeping. They engage in this behaviour because they cannot otherwise receive the gratification which they require. The gang-bang circle game is significant primarily because of what it reveals about the protagonist: he is a voyeur who cannot rest until he has at least some knowledge of the activities in which others are engaged.

b) Sex and Sadism

Sexual obsession is a very important theme in Kosinski's work. In a scene near the beginning of *Steps*, the protagonist visits a tiny village reminiscent of those in *The Painted Bird*. While there, he is invited to view an unusual performance. Just as in the two earlier examples, the spectacle involves a large number of men, this time as spectators and not participants. The peasants watch as a young girl has sexual intercourse with a large animal. The scene is very dramatic and creates an odd sensation of expectation.

> The organizer led the animal into the center of the arena, prodding its slack parts with a stick. Two peasants ran up and grabbed at the animal to keep it still. The girl then stepped forward and began playing with the creature, embracing and hugging it, fondling its genitals. She slowly began to undress. The animal was now aroused and restless. It seemed inconceivable that the girl could accommodate it. (Steps, 20)

Kosinski's cryptic description of this act of bestiality, which does not disclose what species of animal she is embracing, adds to the reader's amazement and horror. As the peasants become more excited, the organizers demand that they pay extra for each additional inch that the animal penetrates the woman. Why would such a wholly detestable episode be included in this novel? Does Kosinski feel that depravity and humiliation are such an inevitable part of the human experience that avoiding their discussion would be intellectually dishonest? In this regard, *Steps* does not pull any of its punches. The crowd grows frantic, believing the woman could not possibly tolerate any further violation. The scene becomes Monday Night Football meets *The Painted Bird.* It is almost as though the first novel is still going on and the protagonist of *Steps* has unwittingly stumbled into a mislaid scene. The last thing the narrator tells the reader is that he hears the woman screaming, though he is uncertain whether she is "actually suffering or...only playing up to the audience." (Steps, 20) Detached from her anguish, it is almost as if he is watching her lewd performance on videotape, rather than witnessing this bestial coupling firsthand. This scene is an example of "the dissociation of feeling from consciousness." (Boyers 1972, 57) It is hard to accept that the woman is not screaming in horror or terror, but the narrator has learned to question everyone's sincerity. He must entertain the notion that she, like so many others, is merely going through the motions. It is in this way that the narrator of *Steps* is most like the boy of *The Painted Bird.*

Steps concerns itself with every permutation of human sexuality, every type of deviance and every sort of obsession. The young protagonist of *The Painted Bird*, however, is innocent when the reader first encounters him. He "learns about love and sex from the peasants, and what he learns is that sexuality is only another form of violence." (Everman 1991, 33) Each new experience, including his first sexual encounter, leads him back to horror and pain. His only reaction to seeing Labina (another of his peasant masters) with one of her lovers is disillusionment.

> I looked on with disappointment and disgust at the two intertwined, twitching human frames. So that's what love was: savage as a bull prodded with a spike; brutal, smelly, sweaty. This love was like a brawl in which man and woman wrested pleasure from each other, fighting, incapable of thought, half stunned, wheezing, less than human. (PB, 174)

Early on in *The Painted Bird*, while living with the miller and his wife, the boy studies the way in which men and women interact. Whenever the miller suspects his wife is flirting with other men, he mercilessly horsewhips her. Watching through a crack in the floorboards, the boy begins to associate sex and violence. Later, after the miller plucks out the eyes of a young plowboy whom he suspects of lusting after his wife, the boy learns a valuable lesson. Although still very young and unable to say whether the plowboy is permanently blind, he nevertheless makes a pact with himself, as well as his readers.

> I made a promise to myself to remember everything I saw; if someone should pluck out my eyes, then I would retain the memory of all that I had seen for as long as I had lived. (PB, 40)

It is at this point that the boy develops a lifelong fixation with memory, as well as with standing on the margins of an experience and observing (and remembering) all that he sees. It is his fulfillment of this promise, to remember every frightful detail of his childhood,

that makes *The Painted Bird*, as a novel, possible in the first place. Throughout his short life, the boy witnesses only examples of degradation. With few exceptions, the sexual encounters in *The Painted Bird* are invariably brutal, painful and terrifying. For example, the Kalmuks, who arrive just prior to the Red Army have managed to transform rape into an art form. They maim and murder with such savage brutality that the mere mention of their name terrifies the peasants. Everyone in their path is a target, though they especially enjoy tormenting young women. The boy describes numerous gang rapes and double and triple penetrations of young girls.

> In the middle of the square some Kalmuks displayed their skill in raping women on horseback. One of them stripped off his uniform, leaving only his boots on his hairy legs. He rode his horse in circles and then neatly lifted off the ground a naked woman brought to him by the others. He made her sit astride the horse in front of him, and facing him. The horse broke into a faster trot, the rider pulled the woman closer making her lean her back against the horse's mane. At every lunge of the horse he penetrated her afresh, shouting triumphantly each time. The others greeted his performance with applause. The rider then deftly turned the woman around so that she faced forward. He lifted her slightly and repeated his feat from the back while clutching her breasts. (PB, 187)

Arriving as they do in the last moments of the war, the Kalmuks crystallize everything the boy already believes. In his mind, intimacy and passion are inexorably linked to savagery and cruelty. "Like every other aspect of his world, contact between men and women is a form of brutality and domination." (Everman 1991, 34) There are only two kinds of participants in sexual relationships: victims and victimizers. *The Painted Bird* is a firsthand account of what it means to be dominated, while *Steps* describes the corollary: the dynamic of asserting power over others. The central metaphor of the first novel is the painted bird itself, trying unsuccessfully to rejoin its flock, but unable to do so. In *Steps*, however, the symbol which springs to mind is the pitiable image of the naked woman

imprisoned in a cage. The protagonist of *Steps* is the master dominator, at one point remonstrating that he cannot help identifying closely with victimizers (because of the accessibility of their motivations) rather than with their silent victims. Whether he is giving his girlfriend away to a party of men or spying on a neighbor in his apartment building, he lives to exercise power over others. Sexual domination of his partners is simply the most effective means he has of demonstrating his power. Other people interest the protagonist only insofar as they are mysteries to be solved, and once they are, he moves on. It is almost impossible for him to bring himself to trust others; their value to him is in providing insight into his own identity. This occurs in the incident with the blindfolded woman, when the protagonist is frustrated by his inability to impact the woman's life (even after making love to her) in any measurable way. He is infuriated by his incapacity to dominate her, either sexually or emotionally. In *Steps* the narrator's language tends to portray women in objective terms: as polyps, gifts and caged playthings.

In *The Painted Bird,* sex is disconnected from love. In that sense, at least, the Kosinskian protagonist of *Steps* grows out of the boy of the first novel. Indeed, in Kosinski's work, even nudity is never discussed in terms of joy or freedom or eroticism. Instead, it generally symbolizes a position of vulnerability. (Lilly 1988, 49) In *The Painted Bird,* when men are put together with women, rape is a far more likely result than love. For example, when a young Jewish girl is found alive beside the railway tracks, her violation is a virtual inevitability. During yet another voyeuristic episode, the boy watches through a knothole while Rainbow tries to deflower the Jewess. This scene is particularly brutal since it is clear that the girl has never previously had a man. During the rape, "the two become locked together, Rainbow unable to extricate himself, the girl unable to expel him." (Karl 1983, 154) Rainbow becomes furious and begins to beat the girl. While discussing their predicament, Kosinski compares the two to dogs, locked in a "coital seizure."

(Lupack 1988, 79) This scene is devoid of either dignity or the slightest hint of sexual pleasure (even for the rapist). Eventually, the girl must be killed in order to free Rainbow. This episode of consumption confirms the peasants' xenophobia, that Jews "desire to destroy the Gentile...even at the expense of their own [lives]." (Karl 1983, 154) There are a number of similar scenes in *The Painted Bird*, the most sinister of which is only mentioned in passing, thereby making it all the more memorable. After he first moves in with Garbos, the boy reports that an orphaned Jewish girl had been living in the house just prior to his arrival. Garbos is paid to care for her, but he does not, instead renovating "his farm with the money he received for her keep." (PB, 122) One day, however, she simply vanishes. The reader is left to ponder what sort of horrendous indignities the girl was forced to endure prior to her murder or (more likely) suicide.

In Kosinski's fiction, there are a number of recurring sexual themes. Among the most unnerving is his interest in bestiality. He discusses this taboo a number of times in *The Painted Bird*, occasionally overwhelming the reader with his graphic descriptions, though usually content to simply drop brief, disturbing reminders that such things are taking place all around the boy. The story of Lekh's true love, Stupid Ludmila, is a case in point. According to the legend, when a peasant sends a large dog to attack her, the dog decides to stay with her instead, refusing to return to his owner. From that point on, Stupid Ludmila will not go anywhere without the animal. This leads to conjecture on the part of the peasants.

> It was said that Stupid Ludmila lived with this huge dog as with a man. Others predicted that someday she would give birth to children whose bodies would be covered with canine hair and who would have lupine ears and four paws, and that these monsters would live somewhere in the forest. (PB, 47)

Later in the novel, drunken Kalmuks attempt to copulate with a mare, while others endeavour to arouse a stallion and force a woman onto its penis. The most traumatic instance of bestiality, however, occurs when the boy witnesses his first love, Ewka, fornicating with a he-goat. This scene replicates itself in *Steps*, when the narrator is working as a photographer in an old-age home. The setting resembles a house of horrors, with the protagonist surrounded by cranky, wrinkled, drooling, toothless, excrement-covered old people. Even the smell of the home is utterly stifling. The narrator becomes very depressed (realizing that in all likelihood he too will one day end up in a place like this) and becomes attracted to the only person in the home who is clean and healthy, a young nurse. One day he discovers the nurse making love to an odd creature, a half-human, half-ape animal that lives in a segregated part of the hospital. The protagonist is clearly disgusted by his discovery. It is incidents like this one which convince him that he cannot really ever know anyone, that their motivations and proclivities cannot be rationally deduced. In Kosinski's work, people's urges are often portrayed as disgusting and bizarre. It is fitting then that Kosinski's first two novels have a bestiality motif, since many of the characters are not really much more compassionate or sophisticated than the most savage animals. Bestiality is the highest form of alienation insofar as those who practice it have apparently given up even trying to connect with other people. They have been so objectified by life and disconnected from others that they cannot (or do not wish to) distinguish between people and animals. When the boy of *The Painted Bird* sees Ewka with the goat (through yet another conveniently located hole in the wall) he realizes that to her there is really no difference between the goat, her father, her brother and himself. They are just four beings with whom she shares her body.

Kosinski continues to explore the incest theme in *Steps*. The narrator recounts the story of a woman who wishes to have a relationship with her brother.

> She didn't see anything unnatural about such a relationship; certainly there was more of a difference between her brother and her than, say, between two women who fall in love with each other and have the physical relationship she had come across so often in college. It would be an alliance unlike one she could have with anyone else. The two of them could do or say whatever they pleased; she could never be so free, or so much herself, with any other person. (Steps, 40-41)

The woman makes a very convincing case for turning away from others and embracing the man she knows best. For her, the taboo prohibiting incest serves no useful purpose. It merely prevents her from consummating what she suspects may be a rewarding relationship. In *Steps*, Kosinski forces his readers to reevaluate their established values. He also looks at other fetishes, such as voyeurism. One of the more peculiar scenes in *Steps* involves the protagonist making love to a tubercular patient in a mirror. After the nuns try to deny him access to her room, he spends many hours alone. During this period, he reviews the photographs that he has taken of the woman: as he has so many times before, he pictures himself with her, though not actually touching her.

> I looked at these pictures as if they were mirrors in which I could see at any moment my own face floating ghost-like on her flesh. (Steps, 17)

James Park Sloan refers to the sanatorium scene as "the book's prototypal episode," because it deals with the difference between image and substance. (Sloan 1996, 258) Like the scene in *Being There* (1971) where EE touches herself and then attributes her orgasm to Chance's strength and masculinity (despite his complete impotence and ignorance even of the rudiments of intercourse), the tubercular woman in *Steps* caresses herself while imagining what it might be like to touch the protagonist. At the same time, the protagonist projects himself completely into the mirror. This seems like an appropriate place for him to be, since he cannot quite seem to connect with others and works to project specific

images of himself for others to consume. The experience of sexual intercourse in a mirror allows him to focus not just on the woman alone, but on both of their naked bodies together.

These images of sex dominate Kosinski's work. According to Stanley Kauffmann, "many of the episodes [of *Steps*] star the male organ, in fact and symbol." (Kauffmann 1968, 22) Indeed, from the circumcision conversation to the National Day fiasco (in which the protagonist has an erection in front of his entire army regiment), penises are on prominent display in Kosinski's work. Even in the first pages of *The Painted Bird*, the boy is identified as a Jew because of his little, circumcised 'tassel.' While he is with Ewka, he has a recurring nightmare:

> One part of my body grew rapidly in size, while the rest remained unchanged. I became a hideous freak; I was locked in a cage and people watched me through bars, laughing excitedly. Then Ewka came naked through the crowd and joined me in a grotesque embrace. (PB, 154)

This dream is significant because it shows how the protagonist is already beginning to derive a sexual identity, even at this young age. As a Jew in Europe during the war, his penis could indeed lead to his imprisonment or death. The idea of power and control is inherent in any discussion of male sexuality. He dreams of being powerful enough to impress Ewka, but fears that somehow this fantasy may lead to his downfall, that a large member would make him appear as a monster or freak. It is nearly impossible for him to have a dream involving total joy, since he has never experienced such a situation. The boy also imagines what it might be like to make love to the other village girls. In these dreams, the boy is transformed into a "tall, handsome man, fair-skinned, blue-eyed, with hair like pale autumn leaves." (PB, 153) He has been taught that no one could possibly love him as

he is, that he would have to be physically transformed in order to be desired by others. Nothing about him is ever adequate.

c) A World of Unrelenting Pain

The destruction of the child's sense of self-worth may be the greatest transgression committed against him in *The Painted Bird.* It is also the wound which remains long after his physical scars have healed. Kosinski's first novel involves a recurring drama: of unceasing mental and physical cruelty slowly eroding the boy's endurance. (Langer 1975, 180) This theme of sadism and cruelty runs all through Kosinski's prose. Some of the most heart wrenching scenes in *The Painted Bird* involve the names the peasants use to describe the boy. He is referred to as either the "unbaptized Gypsy bastard" or "Gypsy vampire" or "Gypsy-Jew." (PB, 122, 144, 100) When the boy and another Jewish man are discovered to be hiding in a village, they are paraded through the streets, pelted with cow dung, fruit and other garbage, while the peasants shout, "Beat the Jews, beat the bastards." (PB, 116) Olga the Wise One, the woman who originally purchases him after Marta's death, refers to the boy as the Black One.

> From her I learned for the first time that I was possessed by an evil spirit, which crouched in me like a mole in a deep burrow, and of whose presence I was unaware. (PB, 18)

She convinces him that he is possessed by evil phantoms and that he has bewitching powers. Since the peasant culture is replete with these sorts of stories (and since he is never told otherwise) the boy begins to suspect that the tales may be true. After all, what else could possibly explain his continuing victimization? He is searching for cause and effect and the peasants' behaviour towards him seems to confirm that the shadow of an evil spirit does indeed hover over his life. The fact that the peasants never question their

value system for a millisecond persuades the boy that they must be on to something. The carpenter, for example, fervently believes that the boy's black hair may attract lightning to his farm; when his fear is realized, he decides to murder the boy in retribution. It no longer matters whether this act is rational: the boy's life is at stake, just the same as if his hair actually did have the capacity to attract lightning. Only the consumption of the carpenter by the rats (after he falls into their bunker) saves the boy from certain death.

Even when he makes an effort to trust others, they inevitably let him down, and this creates further confusion about where he fits into society. He is not sure who his friends are, so he is forced to assume that everyone is a potential enemy.

> A few of the [Nazi] soldiers surrounded me. They pointed at me, laughed or grew serious. One of them walked up close to me, leaned over, and smiled straight in my face with a warm, loving smile. I was going to smile back when he suddenly punched me very hard in the stomach. I lost my breath and fell, gasping and groaning. The soldiers burst into laughter. (PB, 114)

While living with the peasants, the boy is continually beaten and whipped, but the punishments that Garbos visits upon him are even more exquisitely painful and sadistic. When he is asleep, Garbos muzzles Judas and heaves the dog into the boy's bed. Though he is not in immediate danger, the boy is prevented from recovering from the day's torture. The child grows so terrified of Judas that he begins having nightmares about being mauled by the vicious beast. There is also an odd sexual tension which underlies how Garbos relates to the boy. At times, Garbos employs techniques of punishment which more resemble a husband's castigation of an unfaithful wife than they do of disciplining a young child, including tickling the boy's armpits and feet and threatening to place a mouse under a glass on top of the boy's belly so that it will eat the child's entrails. (PB, 129) At each successive interaction in which he is treated as something less than human, the boy is

denied the kinds of positive experiences which would allow him to feel love and hope. After awhile, he begins to internalize the others' view of himself. Nothing that they do to him is ever a surprise: he grows to anticipate their brutality, whether it be Makar nearly killing him with a savage kick to the stomach (which sends the boy flying over a fence) or the Kalmuk soldier smashing him in the chest with a rifle butt. Very early in the story, the boy becomes aware of the price to be paid for nonconformity. While living with Lekh, the boy hears a story about how Stupid Ludmila, after refusing to participate in an arranged marriage to an ugly man, is gang raped by a drunken group of the fiancé's friends. Somehow this experience transforms her: she becomes a strong, independent, proud, salacious, almost mythical Amazon-type, renowned for doing exactly as she pleases.

> She lived in the forests, lured men into the bushes and pleased them so much with her voluptuousness that afterwards they could not even look at their fat and stinking wives. No one man could satisfy her; she had to have several men, one after another. (PB, 48)

This, in turn, engenders great resentment among the village woman. One day, when she is in a particularly amorous mood, Stupid Ludmila first tries to molest the boy, and then takes on a large group of farmers. Without warning, a mob of enraged peasant women appears with rakes and shovels. They beat and scratch Ludmila and then rape her (literally to death) with a bottle of manure. The forces of conformity, which created her identity (as a wild woman) in the first place, cannot tolerate her ongoing sexual freedom. Taken together, these types of brutal experiences, which include both mental and physical abuse as well as the observation of horrific acts perpetrated against others, reshape the boy. Inexorably (and quite against his will), he is transformed into what Frederick Karl calls "an agent of destruction." (Karl 1983, 152) This trend continues in *Steps*, a book "held together by a compelling lack of conscience." (Blumenfeld 1968, 108) In Kosinski's second novel, the protagonist thinks of others strictly "in sado-masochistic terms," as

objects he may injure or even kill with impunity. (R. Jones 1969, 21) This is a man who feeds fishhooks and crushed glass to children, throws bricks at night watchmen, spies on his neighbors, intimidates others for money and gives his girlfriend away against her will. He has been desensitized by the extraordinary suffering to which he has seen others subjected. The woman he finds imprisoned in a cage, for example, serves as a distressing reminder that sadism is ubiquitous.

He also recounts other stories, such as the tale of the concentration camp boxer, which demonstrates the essential hopelessness of the human condition. In the story, a heavyweight is sent to a concentration camp. When the camp commandant hears of this, he invites an actual champion from outside the camp to fight the prisoner. If the prisoner loses (but still fights hard) "he could ask for the release of a single prisoner otherwise destined for the gas chamber," whereas if he wins, an extra prisoner will be murdered. (Steps, 65-66) Ultimately, the match does not occur because the champion backs out of the fight. The prospect of winning the fight so that an inmate will be saved from death or losing to the prisoner heavyweight, "an enemy of his race," leaves the champion in a no-win situation. (Steps, 66) The prisoner, however, survives the war, spending all his time alone, guarding the disintegrating cemetery of (what the narrator describes as) a despised religious minority. There is a certain inevitability to stories like the aforementioned, a relentlessness, in which human life is portrayed as essentially valueless. The prisoner, in the end cannot save anyone but himself. (Steps, 66) He is yet another victim, though of a different type than Stupid Ludmila or the boy of *The Painted Bird.* The boxer of *Steps* will forever remain a captive of his memories, perhaps always regretting (and being unable to cope with the idea) that he was unable to save even one other prisoner.

Part of this obsession with the sadistic involves cruelty to animals. Kosinski's original working title for his first novel, *The Jungle Book*, suggests that he was aware of how

unsettling American readers might find his novel. (Plimpton & Landesman 1972, 203) This obsession with animals seems entirely appropriate in *The Painted Bird* since so many of the characters behave with what can only be described as beastly cruelty. In addition, the animal kingdom is made up of predators and prey and the law of the jungle seems to explain how the novel is organized. (Skau, Carroll & Cassidy 1982, 45) With the exception of Mitka, Gavrila and perhaps the Silent One, almost everyone else seems to only care about their own lives. No one is particularly concerned over the fate of the boy. In *The Painted Bird*, human agony is sometimes foreshadowed by parallel tales of cruelty to animals. In the first pages of the novel, the boy describes his first friend, whom he makes while living with Marta.

> A small red squirrel often visited the hut. After a meal it would dance a jig in the yard, beating its tail, uttering tiny squeaks, rolling, jumping, and terrorizing the chickens and pigeons.
>
> The squirrel visited me daily, sitting on my shoulder, kissing my ears, neck, and cheeks, teasing my hair with its light touch. After playing it would vanish, returning to the wood across the field. (PB, 5-6)

Within a short time, peasant boys capture the squirrel, pour gasoline over it and light it on fire, laughing as it burns to death. This mirrors what is going on all around the boy as the war rages through Europe. Kosinski's technique of portending human behaviour through the interactions of animals allows a reexamination of what is actually occurring in *The Painted Bird*.[23] For example, during the scene in which the miller plucks out the plowboy's eyes, another related situation is playing itself out on the floor of the dining room. As a tomcat attempts to mate with the miller's pet tabby, it becomes clear that the cats are really a trope for the attraction between the plowboy and the miller's wife.

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[23]In that sense, Kosinski's first novel is oddly similar to Art Spiegelman's 1986 graphic novel, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale.*

Similarly, when Rainbow becomes locked inside the Jewess while raping her, the boy is reminded of analogies in the animal kingdom.

> I had often seen the same thing happen to dogs. Sometimes, when they coupled violently, starved for release, they could not break loose again. They struggled with the painful tie, turning more and more away from each other, finally joined only at their rear ends. They seemed to be one body with two heads, and two tails growing in the same place. From man's friend they became nature's freak. They howled, yelped, and shook all over. Their bloodshot eyes, begging for help, gaped with unspeakable agony at the people hitting them with rakes and sticks. Rolling in the dust and bleeding under the blows, they redoubled their efforts to break apart. People laughed, kicked the dogs, threw screeching cats and rocks at them. The animals tried to run away, but each headed in the opposite direction. They ran in circles. In mad rage they tried to bite each other. Finally they gave up and waited for human help. (PB, 108-109)

This situation is every bit as humiliating and unpleasant for the humans that become stuck together as it is for the canines. The boy also tells the reader of other experiences he has had with animals. In the scene in which the carpenter is eaten alive, "the rippling mass" of rats (PB, 61) described by the boy are essentially a ruthless and insane mob, much like Hitler's followers. While the rats are harmless individually, they become lethal when placed together in a confined area, at which time their bloodlust is activated.

While he is living with the bird catcher, the boy notices that whenever Lekh is angry or frustrated he plays cruel tricks on birds. After a female stork pecks him, he avenges his injury by placing a goose egg in her nest. After the baby birds hatch, the 'Mother Stork' is accused of adultery by her mate and then pecked to death by the other storks. Sometimes, when Stupid Ludmila is away, Lekh grows angry and engages in his favourite pastime (from which the novel derives its name), painting a single bird a gaudy color and then releasing it into the air to be murdered by its kin. Unable to recognize their former friend,

they deduce that it is another species of bird and kill it. On other occasions, the boy is the cause of an animal's pain. While living with Makar, the Quail and Ewka, the boy is asked to skin a prized giant white rabbit. The scene is disturbing because it is implied that Makar is having sexual relations with the rabbit, and is angry or dissatisfied with the animal for some reason. After the boy believes he has killed the rabbit, he begins to skin her, only to learn halfway through the procedure that the animal is still alive. This episode is one of the most horrific in the novel. The rabbit gets loose and runs about the farm, howling in pain.

> With her skin hanging down behind her she rolled on the ground uttering an unending squeal. Sawdust, leaves, dirt, dung, clung to the bare, bloody flesh. She wriggled more and more violently. She lost all sense of direction, blinded by flaps of skin falling over her eyes, catching twigs and weeds with it as with a half pulled-off stocking.
> (PB, 155-156)

Eventually, Makar is forced to put the unfortunate creature out of its misery by killing it with an axe. The boy has had his first lesson—and one he is sure never to forget—in inflicting pain. This scene is similar to the one in *Steps* where the protagonist watches an octopus, miserable at its captivity, consuming its own tentacles, trying to end its own life. The Kosinskian man views life similarly. Being held captive, or being made into a victim, is unthinkable. He has made his choice: it is preferable to be the rabbit-skinner than the rabbit. He is determined to hold on to the skin of his identity, to remain in control of his life.

d) Revenge

Throughout the course of *The Painted Bird*, "revenge and retribution become the way of life" for the boy. (Coale 1973, 32) He notices that those who do not fight back cannot

expect anything but continued victimization, followed by their deaths. "In *The Painted Bird* Nazism becomes the mechanized metaphor of human existence, and the boy's desperate adventures transform him into the mechanic embodiment of hate and revenge upon which the Nazi vision of the world was built." (Coale 1973, 32) After the war, the boy is on the lookout for situations in which he feels he has been victimized. When this occurs, he moves into revenge mode before any more psychological or physical damage can be done. When a theatre attendant treats him roughly, he drops bricks on the man's head. Similarly, when a peasant roughs him up, he and the Silent One derail the man's train to teach him a lesson. By this point in the novel, what the boy really wants is the opportunity to "take revenge upon the human race." (Aldridge, 1983, p. 60) Though the derailment plan ultimately fails to kill their target, the boy still feels empowered; he is no longer standing by and allowing life to come to him. This wish continues to inform Kosinski's work and is one of the organizing principles of *Steps*. This version of the Kosinskian man is evaluating his life on a minute by minute basis. By the time that the protagonist proclaims that he has been wronged by another man while attending university (and that the man is of peasant stock), there can be no debate about what will happen next. Because the man is part of the paramilitary student defense corps, the protagonist bases his revenge on the fact that his rival unquestioningly respects authority. It is the man's primary weakness and the protagonist feels justified in exploiting it. In a brusque military voice, the protagonist calls the man at his guard post and demands that the university unit be mobilized to attack the city arsenal. The man carries out these orders without question and is court-martialed. Once again, the protagonist has outsmarted an adversary: whether the man even viewed himself as the protagonist's enemy is not pertinent. Instead, the protagonist focuses on seizing the moment. Prepared for virtually anything, he operates alone, relying almost exclusively on artifice and ingenuity and motivated by a greater knowledge of what it means to be a victim than his opponent.

In the end, the Kosinskian protagonist does not wish to be at the mercy of circumstance; rather, he wants to be the "shaper of events." (Aldridge 1983, 61) His fixation with exacting clever and vicious retaliation is the most important part of his taking control. In *Steps*, the narrator is clearly the aggressor in each interaction, whereas in the first novel, the boy merely accepts each indignity as it occurs. The events of *The Painted Bird*, such as the miller blinding the plowboy, serve as his primary education in the ways of the world. For the Kosinskian man, the need for revenge against those who cross him becomes less an attitude than a central organizing principle, "deeply ingrained, the wellspring of the purpose of his life, the basis for his behavior in all situations." (Notes of the Author, 26) What emerges from the trauma of the survival experience is a new protagonist, utterly obsessed with the notion of regaining control of his own life. He goes about the business of exacting revenge in a mechanical way, "totally without remorse." (Aldridge 1983, 61) This need to avenge actual and perceived transgressions begins when the boy encounters Mitka the Cuckoo. Mitka teaches the boy that it would be a mistake to simply forgive the cruelty to which he has been subjected. Mitka knows the boy idolizes him and will follow his example, so he teaches the boy to use his rage as a tool. As the boy watches, Mitka takes responsibility for his life by avenging the murder of his friends. That he may end his own army career, since he is acting against express orders, does not concern him in the slightest. Mitka fervently believes that "a man should never let himself be mistreated." (PB, 227) His act of revenge is a declaration of independence: he will not allow himself to be victimized.

After the war, the boy is no longer capable of compassion. It has been beaten out of him. "He carries within himself his own brand of justice and metes out punishment to others according to his own reckoning." (Notes of the Author, 28) Even as a young man, the protagonist of *Steps* will not accept his victimization without fighting back. First, he maneuvers the farmer's daughter into ingesting fishhooks and later, as he grows bolder, he

utilizes clever disguises, sophisticated electronics, artful manipulations, and inspired acts of cruelty. (Aldridge 1983, 59) With regard to revenge, *Steps* is *The Painted Bird* turned inside out: instead of a prototypical protagonist victim who must learn the art of reprisal, the narrator of *Steps* starts out as an expert avenger, who is only occasionally unable to effect total control of his life. The difference between the books is that there are no villains in *Steps* trying to victimize the protagonist, certainly not of the calibre of Garbos and Judas. The first novel is essentially an ongoing battle for survival and against continuing dehumanization, whereas the struggle in the second novel occurs entirely within the protagonist, as he attempts to dominate each of his social interactions and to somehow remain an individual in the face of a repressive collectivity. Ironically, one of the most satisfying moments of revenge, in all of Kosinski's work, occurs in *The Painted Bird* when the Kalmuks (the Soviet deserters whom the Nazis employ to terrify dissident communities) enter the village where the boy is living.

> For a moment, as I looked at them, I felt great pride and satisfaction. After all, these proud horsemen were black-haired, black-eyed, and dark-skinned. They differed from the people of the village as night from day. The arrival of these dark Kalmuks drove the fair-haired village people almost insane with fear. (PB, 185)

For the first time in the book, the fair-haired are made to suffer. Since they look so much like the boy, the Kalmuks seem (if only for a brief moment) like his elder brothers, come to exact a terrible retribution. Though the boy is almost killed by the Kalmuks, it is somewhat cathartic for the reader to see the peasants finally made to feel real fear, of the type that the boy has been made to feel throughout the novel. Soon the Kalmuks are raping, sodomizing, castrating and murdering with impunity. As the boy watches these barbarians go about their work, any feeling of relief at seeing the peasants suffer quickly recedes. The boy feels embarrassment since the bestial Kalmuks look so much like him. Several pages on, however, the Red Army tracks down the Kalmuks and murders them,

thereby completing a circle of revenge. The boy is nursed back to health by Mitka and Gavrila, but the lesson of what he has seen stays with him. He has now witnessed both sets of his oppressors (the peasants and the Kalmuks) get their comeuppance. And more importantly he has survived. The war finally over, he is resolute that he will never again play the role of victim. There is no question that the protagonist of *Steps*, in that sense, is very much the successor to the child narrator of *The Painted Bird.*

e) The Growing Desire for Control

Near the end of *The Painted Bird*, after the boy has said good-bye to his friends, Mitka the Cuckoo and Gavrila, he travels back to the same large city in which he lived prior to the war. The train station is absolute chaos: Soviet soldiers, Red Cross workers, invalids, half-naked children, foreign military delegations and "emaciated people in striped clothes" pass one another in silence. (PB, 222) Accompanied by a Soviet soldier named Yury, the boy arrives at the orphanage which is now his home.

> Finally, the woman principal came over and greeted us, taking the folder with my documents from Yury. She signed some papers, gave them to Yury, and placed her hand on my shoulder. I firmly shook it off. The epaulets on a uniform were not meant for a woman's hands. (PB, 223)

The boy has evolved from a small child, powerless to stop his victimization, into an angry, violent, recalcitrant adolescent. By the end of the novel, he has ceased to be "everybody's victim." (Wiesel 1965, 5) Instead, Kosinski gives the reader a glimpse of the type of adult that the boy will eventually become. From this point forward, the atmosphere of *The Painted Bird* begins to resemble that of *Steps*. The protagonist cannot help himself: he tests boundaries and probes for weakness. Being a victim is so repellent to him that he chooses to become the ultimate interventionist, preferring to create his own

drama rather than to participate in one conceived by others. When the principal touches the boy it is an indication that at long last someone wishes to treat him with kindness. But it arrives too late. His education in victimization long finished, he now instinctively distrusts everyone. Having held human dust in his hands, he sees the world as a gigantic incinerator. Now all that interests him is shaping his own destiny. What occurs after this point is a relentless struggle for greater and greater control, from the end of *The Painted Bird* through *Steps* (and beyond). As *The Painted Bird* winds down, the boy is still struggling to reach a greater level of self-awareness. *Steps* begins at this point. The protagonist of the second novel conceives people as actors in a script. His expert knowledge of victimization informs his every action. Emotionally spent, he aims to maintain control of each situation. Thus the victimization does not cease with the end of his childhood. This version of the Kosinskian man lives a hollow and lonely life, isolated and so afraid of others that he cannot prevent himself from lashing out at them. Each attempt to reintegrate is thus sabotaged even before it begins.

The premise of this chapter is that *The Painted Bird* may serve as a primer in unlocking the enigmatic montage of random vignettes which form the basis of Jerzy Kosinski's second novel. Moreover, this approach has the advantage of allowing a reconsideration of the importance of Kosinski's savage and powerful first novel. *The Painted Bird* is the starting point for a systematic exploration of victimization. When the reader first encounters him, the protagonist is young and defenseless, almost incapable of appreciating the extreme danger in which he finds himself. Children are intimidated by adults at the best of times, but Kosinski's novel goes beyond this, to explore what would happen to a child if he were left entirely alone, to face a waking nightmare over a period of years. The boy learns that being conspicuous is dangerous. Terrified by the physical and emotional brutality of his peasant tormentors, he longs for nothing more than the capacity to blend in. Failing to accomplish this, he realizes the best he can do is to simply

circumnavigate threats to his survival. This is what ultimately gives rise to the Kosinskian protagonist, a man who so ardently believes that the surrender of one's fate to others will invariably have a catastrophic result that he loses faith in everyone, including his parents (whose fate remains unknown for the majority of the novel). This creates an unbreakable pattern. Though the child is unsuccessful in finding foolproof methods to preclude his victimization, he does achieve his ultimate goal. He survives through equal measures of luck, knowledge of folk wisdom and his trusty comet. Unfortunately, this comes at the expense of his capacity to connect to others. He will be eternally disappointed because he cannot heal his wounds. They are simply too deep, to the core of his psyche. The shadow of wartime Europe continues to follow the Kosinskian man throughout his travels, as if to signify that nothing which was done to him can ever be fully redressed.

The boy has been transformed into an outsider, to the point that even the love of his family (whom he eventually learns are alive) is worse than meaningless, it is "suffocating and unbearable; he wanders the streets at night, making friends with the desperate street people, among whom he feels freer and more alive. He is coming now to what he believes is his final philosophical stance, his ultimate picture of the world." (Lavers 1982, 52) The boy views himself as fundamentally alone. When he is asked by an orphanage official (who may have known his family before the war) what became of his mother and father, his answer is significant.

> I wrote nonchalantly on a slate that my parents were dead, killed by a bomb. The members of the commission gave me suspicious looks. I saluted stiffly and walked out of the room. The inquisitive man had upset me. (PB, 225)

The boy is attempting to effect control of his life by substituting a new history, after the fact and in the absence of any evidence whatever, with one he wishes were true. If his parents were really dead, he could not blame them for the horror he was forced to live

through. He has begun to invent a new persona to match this latest chapter of his life. He dreads being returned to the parents who abandoned him and hopes instead that he will end up living with Gavrila. At least in spirit, the boy feels that he is a Soviet citizen, going so far as to wear a specially tailored Red Army uniform that the regiment gave him as a good-bye present.[24] He also refuses to use his mother tongue, arguing with his teachers that his "language is Russian, the speech of a land where there was no exploitation of the one by the many and where teachers did not persecute their pupils." (PB, 225) He wishes to emulate his benefactors, who have done so much to restore his self-confidence, especially Mitka, who has stressed the importance of taking control of his life. At this point, the boy is still vulnerable (and unable to speak), but he is growing bolder, learning how best to hinder his re-victimization in the future. The survival experience has transformed the boy, just as it motivates the comportment of the protagonist of *Steps*.

The second novel is about a man determined to remain in control, even if it means the forfeiture of his spontaneity. He acquires and then discards people as though they are objects. The first fully developed Kosinskian man, he lives to challenge himself. And like the future protagonists of *Cockpit* and *Blind Date*, he is interested in testing his abilities by taking part in activities such as driving high performance automobiles and skiing on dangerous runs. He seems to be a man incapable of failure, who wishes to make his voice heard. Unlike the earlier novel, the protagonist of the second will not permit himself to be silenced. Having no voice is a step on the road to victimhood, a step he will never again permit himself to make. *The Painted Bird* is about physical brutality, while *Steps* is an exploration of the exquisite agony embedded within each moment of experience. (Gladsky 1988, 124) The first novel is a moving adult recollection of childhood, but the second is an exploration of how memory functions over a lifetime. The stories in *Steps* are arranged as

[24]This leads to a humorous struggle in which several nurses attempt to take the smelly uniform from the boy by force.

disjointed memories, chunks of experience rewritten over the passage of time. Shattered by his survival experience, the protagonist has no internal coherence, but is rather a series of fragmented selves, gradually evolving from victim to victimizer. For the reader, *Steps* functions as a kaleidoscope of memory, a virtual photo album of disparate moments, painstakingly collected over time. Since Kosinski wishes to have *Steps* reflect the way in which memory functions, to give selected moments precedence over chronology, he deliberately scatters the snapshots at random in the metaphorical album that is *Steps*. What emerges is a montage of the self.

In Kosinski's work, the world is presented in terms of victims and victimizers, with oppression always a constant. Both novels are pregnant with images of entrapment, from the caged woman in *Steps* to the boy's ordeal with Olga the Wise One, in which he is buried alive and then attacked by ravens. These images of entrapment are manifestations of the need to dominate others. What the protagonist of *Steps* wants is to survive in order to punish his previous oppressors, as well as anyone else who gets in his way. By putting society on the defensive, he reckons he will make a less inviting target. Anyone who will not do exactly as he wishes is a potential opponent. When a woman initially rebuffs his advances, for example, he simply manipulates her life in order to secure a sexual liaison. Since victories of this type are so shallow, he becomes profoundly unhappy, perhaps even more cheerless than the boy of the first novel. The only thing worse than a life out of control is a life under total control. The incredible effort required to choreograph each episode of his life leaves him feeling unfulfilled and frustrated.

In *Steps*, the protagonist is presented as a fascinating conglomeration of various selves, each at very different stages of maturation. While the boy of *The Painted Bird* is searching for reasons that will account for his victimization, for his inability to rejoin the flock, the protagonist of *Steps* has abandoned the search. In the first novel, Gavrila's interpretation

of State Socialism is so seductive that the boy, as so many others at that time, thinks he may have uncovered the organizing principle for the universe. For him, a collectivist society appears as a salvation, but as *The Painted Bird* winds down, he learns that Stalinism is yet another dead-end in terms of helping him understand his ordeal. *Steps* begins with this as its starting point, with a profoundly unsatisfied protagonist who resents the intrusions of this state apparatus into his life. For him, the years after the war were wasted. There was really no flock to rejoin; instead he is merely a cog in a gigantic dehumanizing machine. The protagonist moves through life filled with rage and consumed by paranoia. He wishes to know others better, but he is incapable of sharing anything of himself with them, since he can never be sure about their allegiances. Because he distrusts everyone, he remains aloof, constantly planning ahead and simultaneously reinventing himself. Like the boy, he is infuriated by the status of outsider, but his knowledge of the cruelty to which humans are prone makes him fear intimacy.

Somehow his survival experience as a child has been transposed into his life as an adult in Europe and America. Generally quite circumspect, revealing neither his proper name, nor the nature of his relationship with his family, the protagonist is every bit as ambivalent about his new life in the tedium of American consumer culture as he was about his previous life. He seems destined to remain an outsider, no matter where he travels. Benumbed by his inability to connect with others, he attempts to personally manufacture intensity by orchestrating powerful emotional dramas and demonstrating his capacity for manipulation and torment. He is a man going through the motions of living, not truly interacting so much as testing the limits of each relationship to determine how much punishment it can absorb before becoming irretrievably damaged. After his girlfriend's rape, for example, the narrator shares the following thoughts with the reader:

> I hoped she would recover soon, so we could again make love. I reminded myself that I would have to be gentle to

> her, but the thought was unwelcome. I recalled watching a ballerina whose skill and balance I admired; when I learned that she was pregnant, I could not avoid imagining her unborn child thrown about inside her with every leap she made. (Steps, 56)

He now views his girlfriend with disgust. More importantly, he can only manage to understand the assault in terms of how it affects his life. The scars the woman will carry forever are never discussed. After she is discharged from a clinic, the protagonist insists on subjecting his girlfriend to a series of indignities, in order to redefine her self-image. He eventually loses interest entirely and literally walks out of her life, but not before subjecting her to one final humiliation, the repetition of her initial violation by yet another group of men.

Perhaps the best defined of all of Kosinski's female characters is the woman with whom the protagonist of *Steps* converses in a series of brief dialogues scattered throughout the text. He wishes to influence her thought process, so that her perspective can become more sophisticated and less dependent on clichés. In the end, he disappears entirely from the story, thereby transforming their relationship into yet another fragment of memory. The woman is left alone, seemingly unencumbered by the protagonist's need to direct her life, yet so profoundly affected by her interaction with him that she will never be able to forget him. These mischievous games, which the protagonist is forever playing, probe the limits of human endurance. *The Painted Bird* contains similar gaming themes. With Garbos and Judas, the boy learns that being a player can be very dangerous. In a larger perspective, the entire novel is a game of survival, with the peasants as the boy's opponents.

Game playing is an important component of both novels. For example, the boy's need to confront danger under the train is not unlike the protagonist's participation in activities

like book knock-off. Such games utilize the proximity of physical danger as a way of enhancing one's appreciation for life. Moreover, sexual activity is invariably portrayed as being closer to a form of either entertainment or torment than it is to an act of love. Both novels are concerned with fetishes such as voyeurism, and taboos like incest and bestiality. The boy cannot help coming to the conclusion that intimacy is closely associated with cruelty and sadism. The protagonist of *Steps* seems to have reached a similar conclusion. To him, sex is a form of domination, in which he seeks to gain greater control of his partner, probing the depth of her commitment to him. In addition to sexual obsession, Kosinski is also concerned with sadism and cruelty. Remarkably, the bitterest punishments to which the boy is subjected are not exclusively physical. The way the child of *The Painted Bird* is treated by others is sometimes stunningly hurtful. He is continually reminded that he is different. When Stupid Ludmila is murdered, for example, he understands that it has some connection to her failure to embrace the values held by the villagers.

> In her mad sensual freedom, she was the antithesis of the drab, repressed village women, who hated her because once she had had their men, the men would never return.
> (Lavers 1982, 37)

In the sense that they constrain her individuality, the peasants are like the flock, while Ludmila is merely "another version of the painted bird." (Lavers 1982, 37) In the end, the peasants destroy that which they cannot recognize, acting collectively and with as little mercy as one might expect from wild beasts. This fixation with animals runs through both books, from the vicious rats of *The Painted Bird* to the spectacle of an audience watching a woman copulate with an unspecified species of animal in *Steps*. In a curious mirroring technique in Kosinski's work, the suffering of animals often precedes human anguish. The traumatic death of the boy's squirrel in the beginning of *The Painted Bird*, for example, is similar to what is about to happen to the boy during the remainder of the novel. The boy

endures so much cruelty that his eventual interest in revenge seems almost a natural response to his suffering. With Mitka's help, the boy learns that avenging a perceived wrong is the most important task of the individual. The train derailment (despite the fact that it failed to kill a peasant who had assaulted him) symbolizes his wish to shape events, to ensure he will not be victimized, to take control of his life. After seeing how the Red Army punishes the Kalmuks, he feels a great satisfaction: at least one set of his oppressors has been made to suffer. This fixation with retribution only grows stronger in *Steps* and more powerful still in the novels after it.

The next novel to be examined in the evolution of the Kosinskian man is *Cockpit*. The protagonist of this 1975 book is by far the most dominant of Kosinski's characters. Incapable of trust, Tarden grows emotionally detached. His main concern is protecting his own life. To do this, he feels that he must have the upper hand in every situation. First, though, he must escape his homeland and the apparatus of State Socialism which he sees as imprisoning both his body and spirit. Even after leaving, Tarden remains suspicious of others. Anyone may be a potential enemy. Only by victimizing others can he ensure that they will not victimize him. He does not know how to constructively reengage with other people. Tarden's life consists of one abortive attempt at intimacy after another. All he knows how to do is invade other people's lives. Once there, he seeks out weaknesses—such as emotional attachments—which he may exploit for his own purposes. Tarden's challenge is to see how far into other people's lives he can penetrate without being detected. Whether he is unrecognizable in one of his many assumed personas, or concealed behind the fake walls of his apartment fortresses, or listening to others on his bugging equipment, Tarden is always hiding and seeking out clues to other people's true motivations. His ultimate goal is to discover the secret lives that others wish to keep hidden. Sadly, Tarden's aggressive intrusions are the closest that he will ever come to intimacy. He cannot share and he cannot love. He can only possess and manipulate.

This fixation with controlling others and trying to make them behave as he wishes becomes his defining feature. Will he ever feel sufficiently safe to enter into relationships? Is it possible to achieve the total control that he so desperately craves? Will victory in the games he creates convince him that he is no longer a victim? The next chapter will discuss Tarden in terms of his being the most ruthless and controlling of Kosinski's protagonists, the preeminent Kosinskian man.

CHAPTER THREE
THE WHEEL GAME AND OTHER ILLUSIONS OF CONTROL IN *COCKPIT*

SECTION I - THE FANTASY OF TOTAL CONTROL

Tarden, the resolute protagonist of Jerzy Kosinski's fifth novel, *Cockpit*, bounds onto the opening pages of the novel as the fully realized, preeminent version of the Kosinskian man. From the moment of his first appearance—as he snoops through a stranger's personal effects during a party—it is clear that this is a different sort of protagonist. Control freak does not begin to describe Tarden: he is far beyond this. To Tarden, even the most seemingly insignificant scrap of information has value. And he especially delights in uncovering secrets. Knowing his enemies' weaknesses (and it is clear that Tarden sees everyone as a potential adversary) makes him feel more secure. Tarden comes to the conclusion that intimate knowledge of other peoples' lives can be a weapon every bit as deadly as a bomb or gun. Armed with such knowledge, he has no trouble impelling others into either doing what he says or giving him what he wants. He intimidates, manipulates and dominates all those he encounters with impunity, unconstrained by any sense of proportion. No trick is too loathsome, no threat too outrageous. Even more shocking than Tarden's total self-absorption is the routine, nearly nonchalant manner in which he destroys the lives of others. Throughout the novel, he takes pains to explain why he chooses such extreme measures. Clearly he sees himself as neither compulsive nor excessive. Incapable of sympathy, he feels only enmity for those unlucky enough to fall into one of his snares. His need for control relates less to sadism and egomania (though Tarden definitely has a healthy ego) and more to his view—ingrained in his mind while still a child—that the world is fundamentally hostile and unforgiving. Faced with what he sees as the choice of revisiting his victimhood or declaring his own autonomy, Tarden

feels justified in choosing the latter. He strikes preemptively against those he feels sure might one day have victimized him.

In order to make sense of *Cockpit*, it helps to know something of Tarden's early life. After a frightful wartime childhood, struggling to survive the Nazi occupation, Tarden then passes his adolescence plotting his escape from the communists, growing more embittered and cynical with each passing year. His survival experience has left severe wounds which time cannot heal. Unwilling to truly engage with others, Tarden's wish to reenter society seems destined to go unrealized. The adult Tarden appears an empty vessel, aloof, uninvolved and unable to function in loving relationships. Incapable of trusting, he becomes the ultimate loner. His determination to always win and stay in control—to be entirely self-reliant—becomes his defining feature. By habitually removing others from the mix, Tarden creates an insular world in which he assumes total control of his life. Soon a familiar pattern emerges. From Tarden's perspective, it is better to hurt or punish others than wait around for the inevitable moment when (he is convinced) they will betray him. It does not occur to him, or perhaps he does not much care, that not everyone is a potential enemy.

To Tarden, the end—dominating and prevailing in every situation—always justifies the means. Once he has selected a goal, nothing will dissuade him from achieving it. In this way, he is easily the most resolute of the Kosinskian men. The nameless protagonists of *The Painted Bird* and *Steps* appear to be well along in becoming men like Tarden, while the protagonists who come after Tarden in the next four books are, on balance, a fair bit more forgiving about life. Of Kosinski's unusually determined, yet surprisingly fragile and insecure protagonists, Tarden represents the Kosinskian man par excellence. Like other Kosinskian protagonists, Tarden's haunted childhood in Eastern Europe is just the beginning of a lifetime of suffering. The rest of his days are expended in a bizarre quest to

prohibit others from getting the better of him. Even as a mature man, he remains very much a survivor/wanderer. Paranoid, devoid of hope and alienated from his family, Tarden's trip through life appears as a rather empty affair. His obsession with survival and control, his emotional detachment, his need to play games, his fascination with identity and his fixation with revenge do not serve him well. His quest for control never leads to a meaningful relationship or a better understanding of himself. Despite his plethora of experiences, Tarden remains a sad figure, whose victories, coming as they do at the expense of his humanity, do not come close to satisfying his needs. Unable to share, his triumphs are celebrated alone, inside the carefully constructed fortress of his personal life.

Like two of the novels which preceded it—*Steps* and *The Devil Tree*—*Cockpit* continues Kosinski's favourite stylistic strategy of writing in short, lean vignettes, usually occupying no more than a handful of pages. As explained in Chapter Two (see "The Fragmented Structure of *Steps*"), Kosinski's novels do not necessarily contain a linear narrative structure. In *Steps*, *The Devil Tree*, *Cockpit*, *Blind Date* and *Passion Play*, Kosinski focuses instead on specific vignettes of experience. These four books concentrate on specific moments, selected from the course of a lifetime and placed out of order, to tell the story of a single protagonist's life. The arrangement of the episodes is intended to mimic the chaotic nature of memory and to portray the self as being in a constant state of flux, growing and changing throughout a lifetime. Despite obvious stylistic similarities, the novels are structurally distinct. *Steps*, for example, contains eight chapters, each consisting of a number of vignettes, as well as fragments of a conversation between a man and a woman. Each vignette in *Steps* is separated from every other by means of an asterisk. *The Devil Tree* is more freeform. It has no chapters and each vignette is separated from every other by a few blank lines. *Blind Date* and *Passion Play*

contain chapters, with blank lines separating each vignette from every other within each chapter.

Cockpit has the most unusual structure of all these vignette-driven novels. It does not have chapters as such, but is instead broken into seventeen distinct sections, each containing a number of vignettes. The sections themselves vary in length from nine to twenty-seven pages and are denoted by the presence of a single, bold, capitalized character at the start of the first word in the section. Without these bold caps, *Cockpit* would be one 273-page block of uninterrupted text. What purpose do these bold, capital letters serve? On the most basic level, of course, they break the book into bite-sized chunks. However, they also have a more important purpose. Each of the bold caps introduces a section which explores themes that run throughout the novel. The first section, for example, is made up of several memorable vignettes. As has already been discussed, the book opens with Tarden rummaging through another person's possessions. Succeeding vignettes in this section show him picking up a prostitute, fantasizing and obsessing about his own death, describing in detail the organization of his personal affairs and rationalizing his defensive approach to life, expounding upon his fear of dying alone, spying on his girlfriend, employing his extraordinary memory for financial gain, explaining his childhood obsession with healing, and finally, nearly dying in a dentist's chair. From this frenetic opening section onwards, the novel continues to accelerate, jumping back and forth through time, briefly recounting each of Tarden's most unusual experiences.

This opening section of *Cockpit* occupies only sixteen pages, so the pacing of the book promises to be anything but leisurely. In the first seven sections of *Cockpit* (pages 1-130), the reader realizes that Tarden is a deeply troubled man. He has great difficulty relating to others. In succeeding sections, it becomes clear that his escape from Eastern Europe, like everything else in the first half of the novel, was motivated by his

desire to demonstrate his mastery over events. All his succeeding acts of guile are motivated by this overriding need to stay in control. And each setback that he encounters, such as Valerie's infidelity in the opening section, serves only to reinforce his determination to exercise even greater authority over the events of his life. This single-minded focus on staying in the metaphorical driver's seat leaves him feeling unconnected from anything outside himself. His need for control having been firmly established, the last ten sections (pages 131-273) focus on Tarden's need to play games. These contests, which occur with regularity throughout the second half of the novel, allow Tarden to exert the control that he so desperately craves.

In the first of these gaming sections, Tarden describes a brutal childhood pastime called the Thule game and discusses the odd case of the Flying Gnome. The next section deals with pranks—one a sex trick that Tarden plays on one of his partners and the other a sort of practical joke that Tarden perpetrates—while in disguise—on an unsuspecting young boy. After the Thule game section, almost everything else in *Cockpit* relates, in one way or another, to games. Tarden sees his life as an adult extension of the wheel game that he played so often as a boy:

> Now, I have devised a new kind of wheel game, which provides the human associations my current lifestyle prohibits. Confronted with hundreds of anonymous faces, hundreds of human wheels, I choose one and let it take me where it will. I pick a life and enter it, unobserved: none of my pseudo-family members ever know how I gain access to their lives. (Cockpit, 163)

Tarden's games are all variations on a theme: the 'pseudo-family members' that he speaks of are really more like animals upon which he is performing scientific experiments. Continually creating and winning games seems to appeal to Tarden's need to be in control, to prove—if only to himself—that he is no longer a victim. However, there is a terrible

desperation underlying this behaviour. Tarden's world is a barren place. He lacks any defining sense of purpose, so he takes it upon himself to artificially create it. Games focus attention on the childlike nature of Tarden's character. That he is a frightened boy is implicit in each of the final 'gaming' vignettes. By the second half of the novel, the reader knows that Tarden can only feel secure when he is in control: however, this sort of dominance occurs so rarely in the course of a lifetime that Tarden must work hard to superimpose it on every situation in which he finds himself. His games have a falseness or artificiality about them. His sexual pranks, dress up games, sexual wagers, athletic contests, memorization tricks, terroristic hoaxes, and dangerous stunts all have one thing in common: they are pseudo-events—incidents conceived to impress and frighten others.

Tarden argues that his games are valuable because they alter people's perceptions, both of themselves and the world around them. In this way, Tarden is able to rationalize even the most savage of his chosen pastimes, from the disappearing penis stunt to the food coloring epidemic. Though he justifies them as a sort of kindness, Tarden's stunts are really designed to satiate his need to hurt and dominate others. The only way Tarden has of building himself up is to denigrate others. He wishes to influence the direction of other people's lives, yet he is incapable of accomplishing this end from inside a functioning relationship. His natural inclination (enhanced by his choice of vocation) is to remain in the shadows, covertly pursuing his goals. Nothing can be allowed to disrupt Tarden carefully constructed anonymity. By the end of the novel, when so many of his games have ended in either empty victory and utter failure, it is clear that he will never achieve the total control he seeks. Rendered helpless by a child's prank, the novel ends with Tarden having to reevaluate the manner in which he has lived his life. The tables have been turned on Tarden. The child's games that he has been playing as an adult are every bit as pointless as the dangerous elevator prank—which nearly costs him his life. Forced to evaluate the failure of his own approach to reintegration, it seems reasonable that Tarden

may now take a more constructive approach to his own reentry into society. To be sure, the protagonists in the novels after *Cockpit* (especially *Blind Date*) are aware that total control is a pipe dream: as a result, they are able to more smoothly reenter society.

Considering Tarden's aptitude for 'spin,' as well as his selective memory, it can be difficult for the reader to make sense of all the vignettes included in each of the *Cockpit's* seventeen sections. In all likelihood, placing the pieces of Tarden's fragmented world in order would not produce anything approximating a conventional plot; nevertheless, *Cockpit* presents a fairly accurate picture of how one disturbed man has lived his life. *Cockpit* is more about causality—that is cause and effect—than the unfolding of a plot, Aristotelian or otherwise. In *Cockpit*, as in so much of Kosinski's work, one event does not logically follow another. On the contrary, *Cockpit* jumps between scenes separated by decades, and with no apparent relationship to one another. The only thing they have in common is the protagonist himself. Unlike *The Painted Bird* or *Being There*, whose structure is much more conventional, *Cockpit* takes a more unorthodox approach. Here, Kosinski paints in broad strokes, providing revealing glimpses of Tarden at key moments.

Cockpit examines four distinct periods in Tarden's life: his childhood, his university days, his time as an intelligence agent and his life after resigning from the service. Tarden's narration of his childhood reveals the man he will later become. Nothing about the young Tarden's life seems typical. He sleepwalks, assaults his nanny, has an odd fixation with the body's healing function and enjoys participating in sadistic pastimes such as the Thule game, in which small animals are tortured and drowned. This process of disconnecting from the world, begun in childhood, only accelerates as he grows older. His photographic memory, his most unique trait, serves as concrete proof that he is different from everyone around him. His memory tricks (sleeping in lieu of studying, trying to convince professors that he has not mastered the course material before giving perfect answers and

winning money from trusting shopkeepers) alienates him from others by simultaneously infuriating and intimidating them. Tarden's intelligence may be his most formidable weapon: indeed, his resourcefulness ends up being the single most important factor in his escape from Eastern Europe. In his desire to ensure that his life will not be dictated to him, the younger Tarden is portrayed as being every bit as resolute as his more mature self. Once his plan to leave Eastern Europe is put in motion, nothing will stop him. Should his scheme be discovered, Tarden tells the reader, he will ingest cyanide rather than continue living at the mercy of the Total State.

During the first period of his life, Tarden's agile mind, phenomenal memory and grim determination tend to separate him from others. Despite his youth, he displays an unusual confidence in his own understanding of the world. When he makes a series of prank phone calls to other citizens, Tarden seems to be giving notice that he will not be another cog in the machine of the totalitarian nation state. As he ages (and enters the second phase of his life), he becomes more stoic and inherently less optimistic about what he, as a single man, can accomplish.

> Most people surrendered their lives to the State's omnipresence. I could not deny its existence, but I could abstract myself from its power. (Cockpit, 16)

If he is going to pit his personal control against the vast apparatus of State Socialism, it will be from outside the system. It takes Tarden some time to reach this conclusion—and the novel documents the factors which lead up to his decision to escape—and what comes after.

In many respects, the boy he once was remains very much a part of the adult Tarden. For example, the intense anger he displays whenever things do not go his way has an infantile

quality to it, as though he is having a tantrum. In the early part of the book, no less than later on, Tarden lives to play games and perpetrate scatological pranks. As an adult, he feels vulnerable without his advanced defense weapons (e.g. the incapacitating spray pen on page 228)—which sometimes seem more like elaborate toys. And his descriptions of his life and what he has accomplished resemble nothing so much as childish boasting. The life he lives after he finishes university and eventually escapes from behind the Iron Curtain resembles an adult version of a traditional child's game. Fusing together cops and robbers with spin the bottle, Tarden ends up murdering and/or seducing all of his adversaries.

During the third period of his life—his time in the Service—Tarden demonstrates why he is so effective in his vocation. He enjoys inserting himself into other people's lives, has a unique faculty for getting to the bottom of a story and is not averse to committing acts of violence or theft in order to accomplish his assignment. Still, even when he is working for the government, Tarden is also working for himself, utilizing his connections to secure his future. After his resignation, the fourth period of his life begins. Here nothing changes: he remains circumspect to a fault, always preparing for the worst—a true paranoid. Even his record keeping has an element of overkill in it:

> I have stored my important documents in vaults I rent under assumed names in residential hotels, banks and post office boxes, all prepaid on a long-term basis. I can retrieve the most essential papers at any time, and if I need to leave the country suddenly I can do so without having to return to any place that might be identified as my home. (Cockpit, 3-4)

In the end, Tarden's obsessive-compulsive personality determines both how he lives as well as where:

> Ever since I left the Service, I have simultaneously maintained similar apartments in major cities, every apartment located on one of the top floors of a large high-rise, each rented from a different landlord under a different assumed name. All the buildings can be entered through separate lobbies on different streets, as well as by underground garages and service entrances. (Cockpit, 4)

Regardless of where he goes, he never feels totally secure. To Tarden, even disclosing his name to another person is inherently dangerous. He feels he has no choice but to spend his life on the move, always alert for trouble, never completely at ease. Unless he does something to protect it, Tarden feels that his life could be taken from him at any moment. Exercising power over others removes uncertainty from the equation. Why risk the inevitable disappointment of trusting someone, when it would be much easier to simply manage and control them? From Tarden's perspective, there is a greater degree of safety in coercing others into doing what he wishes. A relationship of equals means that he would be dependent on the other person's good will. Throughout *Cockpit*, Tarden struggles with the matter of control. Everything he does—from terrorizing a child he encounters on an airplane, to perfecting a dangerous ski stunt, to harassing a man into giving up his apartment, to creating a food poisoning epidemic, to blinding another agent, to snooping through other people's mail, to engaging in promiscuous sexual behaviour—is motivated by his need to exert and maintain power over others. From a shattered life, Tarden emerges as the most combative and tempestuous of the Kosinskian men, a man willing to do anything it takes to remain in the driver's seat. The analysis of *Cockpit* which follows will focus on Tarden as the preeminent version of the Kosinskian man and will examine the following areas: 1) emotional detachment; 2) the paradox of control; 3) the nature of identity; and 4) games and rituals. A final section deals with the intersection of fiction and biography.

SECTION II - EMOTIONAL DETACHMENT

As the reader watches Tarden struggling to glue the fragments of his life back together, the full extent of his wounds becomes clear. Shattered by his survival experience, Tarden seems like a direct extension of the unnamed child-protagonist in *The Painted Bird.* His story begins where the boy's leaves off. *Cockpit* seeks to answer the question of what may have become of the traumatized boy once he grew up. The severity of the wounds to Tarden's psyche seem to preclude complete healing. *Cockpit* instead focuses on the battle raging inside Tarden—the struggle to remain an individual in the face of creeping uniformity. His single-minded obsession with the attempt to heal himself will not succeed, but it does define him as a protagonist. In *Cockpit*, two things become clear very rapidly: 1) that Tarden is extraordinarily determined and 2) that he does not trust anyone. The escape sequence that he sets in motion in the opening pages of the novel is a case in point. Frustrated by and dislocated from the Marxist collectivity dominating every aspect of life, Tarden aims to live outside the apparatus of State Socialism. Believing that "the State was a vicious enemy," Tarden resolves that he will either escape or die trying. (Cockpit, 17) Driven forward by a dream of privacy and solitude, away from the prying eyes of the state, Tarden fastidiously lays out an escape plan in much the same way as a novelist sets out to write a story. From deep within the massive and impersonal edifice of the Palace of Culture, Tarden begins marshalling his forces. Armed with only his prodigious talent for self-invention, Tarden successfully manages to manipulate the system to his advantage.

First he invents a number of fictitious academics to act as sponsors for his work abroad. Then he sends dozens of inquiries to his professors, neighbors and friends, as though the state is initiating a background check. The responses, mailed to an office controlled by Tarden, confirm all his worst fears. Though he was suspicious of others before, after

reading the responses he feels completely dislocated from society in general. His professors and friends argue that he cannot be trusted and is inaccessible, while his neighbors accuse his family of harbouring ambivalence towards State Socialism. Perhaps the most damning condemnation comes from an ex-girlfriend who cautions that his odd sexual proclivities might be interpreted as being "alien to the Party spirit." (Cockpit, 24) While he had always entertained suspicions about the Party's intentions, these written documents are physical proof that under the correct circumstances, even his friends and lovers can be induced to inform against him. (Cockpit, 24) Crystallizing his dislocation and paranoia, and confirming what he had suspected from the beginning, Tarden now knows that he can depend on no one but himself.

As he goes through his life, Tarden remains uncertain about where and how he fits into society. The only constant seems to be his inability to relate to others. Tarden himself, at a loss to account for why this is so, resigns himself to the idea that he may never know:

> Perhaps the explanations for my behavior, if there are any,
> are rooted in an area of my past to which I have no access.
> (Cockpit, 121)

Tarden's life is replete with mysteries and contradictions. Though the most macho and cocksure of the Kosinski heroes, Tarden has frail health and acts largely from insecurity. He is terrified of revealing himself to others, but yields to his urge to perform. And although his original motivation was escaping repression, Tarden ends up living a life of even greater circumspection in his newly adopted nation. In truth, there are two Tardens: 1) the gifted con man with a penchant for manipulating both his rivals and his friends, and 2) the young child he once was, grappling with the most basic questions of existence. The adult Tarden struggles to create and maintain control. He dreams of gaining the upper hand in every interaction; as a result, he becomes consumed with minutiae, often

explaining in copious detail how he is able to effortlessly glide in and out of the different worlds which interest him. (Barrett 1976, 356)

The two Tardens, the adult who needs to be in control and the vulnerable, troubled adolescent, are inherently in conflict. It is difficult for the protagonist to reconcile himself to these two personas, both of which are so integrally linked to how he defines himself. Many of his compulsions (e.g. the wheel game) seem like attempts to harmonize the two identities. The victimized child becomes the adult determined to neutralize all those in his way. In a role reversal of sorts, the adult Tarden frequently acts like a child, dressing up in exotic disguises, playing cruel pranks and bragging about his life as a secret agent. Conversely, the boy he was is surprisingly mature in his capacity to evaluate the events unfolding around him. It is never clear which of the two identities will prevail. Like most of Kosinski's other novels, *Cockpit* contains no memorable antagonists, partly because Tarden dispatches them before they can do much damage. The primary tension in the novel is centered within Tarden himself. How can two such different identities—a cowering child and the quintessential alpha male—comfortably subsist within one man? Most of what Tarden does seems rooted in this conflict. There is great sadness in Tarden. Instead of loving others, all he can do is forcibly penetrate their lives. Once inside their lives, he manipulates them, but still cannot force them into giving freely of themselves. What results is a facsimile of a relationship. The subtleties of human interaction elude him, or perhaps do not much interest him. His detachment from what others are feeling makes it impossible for him to ever have a truly loving relationship.

On page two, Tarden explains (ostensibly to a lover, though his act of confession is more significantly a device for communicating with the reader) that even his name is a fabrication. Apparently he sees identity as a means to an end, a convenient form of shorthand by which to define himself for the benefit of others. Tarden has no qualms

about lying his way into other people's lives. "Cockpit" is the perfect metaphor for this novel. Tarden is fond of claustrophobic enclosures from which he can observe without being observed. Tarden has no interest whatever in the superficial. From his hiding spots, Tarden luxuriates in observing the amazing selves that people strenuously conceal from the world. He has a great faculty for manipulating the lives of strangers (often without their being aware of his machinations) and for crushing opposition wherever it occurs, and sometimes before it occurs. He is the ultimate voyeur.

Unable to feel connected to anyone, Tarden is out of touch with his emotional centre. His awareness of his own disconnection leads him to attempt to initiate his own healing process. Tarden's obsession with healing—both physical and emotional—begins early. As a youngster, he is obsessed with and fearful of his body's mysterious abilities. After deliberately cutting himself, he marvels at the autonomic healing process:

> Every day I would check the scab forming to protect the healing wound. When it was fully developed, I carefully peeled off the scab and opened up the wound again. Then I examined it through a magnifying glass, trying to see what it was that made my body heal independent of my will. Although I often tried to keep a wound open and bleeding, it always sealed itself overnight, challenging my power over myself. I hated the sense of an autonomous force in my body, determining what would happen to me.
> (Cockpit, 14-15)

What most disturbs him is his incapacity to exercise control over what is happening. Whether or not a given wound heals or becomes infected is outside his purview. He is relegated to the role of observer of his own convalescence, which he deeply resents. Those things in life that remain outside Tarden's control are a source of frustration. Years later, when he nearly expires during a dental procedure, and is only revived at the last second, Tarden displays forbearance, but no gratitude:

> I was kept in the clinic for a few days, then dismissed, feeling shaky and humiliated. Like the elusive substance that had once healed my wound, now the State has saved me without my consent. (Cockpit, 16)

What sort of man feels resentment over having his life saved? What has gone wrong inside this protagonist? Why is he so obsessed with control? Unfortunately, Tarden's awareness of his own obsessions does not help him bring them under control. On the contrary, his personal compulsions define him.

Despite his wish to correct the deformation of his psyche, he knows only too well that this sort of emotional recovery is not as easily achieved as the healing of an abrasion. Tarden has a difficult time accepting his own limitations. He would like to effect full control over every aspect of his life, but control always lies elsewhere, frustratingly out of reach. Walking alone one night Tarden is accosted by a deranged man with a knife. Pinned against a wall with a blade poking into his back and unable to reach any of his sophisticated weapons, Tarden feels totally helpless. He only survives because the man eventually loses interest and walks away. In another incident, Tarden suffers a violent reaction to a new medication. Seconds away from unconsciousness, he has the presence of mind to go into a shop and bribe a clerk to summon the motorcycle police. The same ritual is observed upon their arrival:

> Two policemen entered and the manager brought them over to me. I pulled myself up until I was standing. I said, "I'm ill, I need medical assistance at once. I can't wait for an ambulance, so I want you to notify the hospital to have an emergency team ready to treat a toxic reaction to an antibiotic. Then take me there by motorcycle." I gave them both several large bills. (Cockpit, 113-114)

This is Tarden at his best, cool and calm under extreme pressure. The incident reveals both the precarious nature of life as well as the exact manner in which Tarden's mind

works. Because his primary assumption is always the same, that people will never intervene on behalf of a stranger unless they have something to gain, Tarden feels that he must make it worth their while. In many ways, this incident reveals far more about Tarden than about those who help save his life. He sees the unknown as an enemy to be neutralized. He cannot imagine that anyone else does not share this view.

Suspicious of everyone else's motives, Tarden spies on his lovers and neighbors and continually moves from one lonely apartment to another, in interchangeable urban settings. His eccentric, anonymous and nomadic life is the best defense against entanglements. Violence and revenge are merely the tools by which he protects his life. The more dislocated and alienated he feels, the more pleasure he takes from picking the scabs off his psychological wounds. After awhile, what he experiences (or rather does not experience) is a numbness or an absence of pain. This dearth of emotion lies at the centre of Tarden's nature. Even after witnessing or perpetrating the most horrific acts imaginable, Tarden's attitude is business as usual, his appearance of external repose a substitute for emotion.[1] Near the beginning of the novel, while employed in Switzerland, Tarden befriends the shy young daughter of a family with whom he is boarding. The girl takes their friendship so seriously that she leaps from a roof when she learns that Tarden is leaving. Her spine is shattered, potentially crippling her. Tarden helps rush her to the hospital, but he merely reports upon her medical prognosis and the fact that he never again saw her family. He does not appear to feel any guilt over his connection to the girl's attempted suicide, nor any pity for her family. It is rare for anyone encountering Tarden to emerge unscathed from the interaction. About half way through the novel, Tarden helps train a dog to retrieve food from under car bumpers. Eventually, after strapping explosives to the dog's belly, Tarden employs the unfortunate beast to blow up a limousine. After witnessing the violent explosion, Tarden remarks on his "own lack of

[1]Discussion with Yehudi Lindeman about the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, Montreal, 12 February 1998.

emotional response to the scene." (Cockpit, 121) Tarden takes pride in this talent and raises it to an art form in *Cockpit*. His wish is to eliminate each purely spontaneous moment in favour of a rigidly composed, almost scripted, reality.

SECTION III - THE PARADOX OF CONTROL

For a man so determined to win at all cost, it seems ironic that after each of his total victories, Tarden appears joyless and empty. The sort of control of which he dreams removes all uncertainty and spontaneity from each interaction. There can be no satisfaction from triumphs achieved using such underhanded tactics. In the end, all that remains is a crude manipulation, virtually devoid of meaning because it is coerced. Stacking the deck, so to speak, means that Tarden has removed any possibility of defeat. His victories seem thoroughly hollow. As a result, Tarden is continually dissatisfied. Even more than those whom he has manipulated, Tarden has cheated himself. Clearly he wants and needs to reengage, but he is simply not ready to trust other people. He spends his life searching for a shortcut to intimacy. His failures only seem to feed his desire, making him all the more determined to control every aspect of his existence.

Tarden takes the matter of control very seriously, carefully weighing the consequences of his actions. He values his own life and does everything possible to ensure its prolongation. He creates "concentric circles" of control. (Lavers 1982, 102) First there are the various unconventional weapons that he carries on his person. Then there are the security devices—concussive explosive devices, false walls, hiding spaces and listening devices—which he builds into his apartments. Next, there is Tarden's meticulous preparation—including spying and background checks—which he engages in prior to venturing out of his apartments. No matter how painstaking his preparations, however, total control frequently eludes him. For example, in the last pages of *Cockpit*, all of

Tarden's preparations and weapons are rendered useless not by a worthy adversary, but by a child's prank. Trapped in a broken elevator, Tarden begins to fear that he may not survive. Unable to hasten his rescue, he has no choice but to wait for help, hoping for the best. He realizes what an inviting and easy target he would have been for anyone wishing to do him harm. Being at the mercy of strangers is intolerable to Tarden. Eventually rescued by his superintendent, this incident will lead Tarden to redouble his efforts, prompting him to become even more circumspect. Though his level of discretion sometimes seems unnecessarily elaborate, the elevator incident shows that this is not the case. If anything, Tarden was embarrassingly vulnerable to the child's trick.

On occasion, Tarden is also undone by his own obsession with control. During a dinner party, Tarden encounters the exotic wife of an important politician. He decides that he will not rest until he enjoys the woman's affections. He meticulously plans a rendezvous in Paris, going so far as to see a general practitioner to determine if any combination of prescription drugs will guarantee his virility during his liaison. The doctor, who clearly disapproves of such extramarital trysts, does the opposite of what Tarden wishes, prescribing a medication which somehow renders Tarden temporarily impotent. Ironically, Tarden himself becomes the cause of the humiliation which he wished to avoid. His determination to avoid it—and his impatience with and rudeness towards the doctor—causes a sort of 'blowback,' assuring his failure with the woman. Wearily, as though to signal that this is not the first time that this has happened to her, the woman paraphrases Proust: "God spare beautiful women from men with imagination." (Cockpit, 93) In a sense her interpretation is correct, since it was Tarden's determination not to fail—and the extraordinary measures he took to ensure his performance—that was actually the cause of her disappointment.

Throughout his life, various incidents make Tarden feel that he must take total control of events, lest he be overtaken by them. One of the first, on the opening pages of *Cockpit*, is a news story that catches Tarden's eye. He clearly sees a similarity with his own situation:

> I recently read about a man who lived alone in a small house in the suburbs. He, too, had no family and went out so seldom that few of his neighbors ever saw him. They had forgotten he even existed, until the postman noticed his mail piling up and notified the police. They found the old man at his kitchen table in front of a portable television set, his shirt unbuttoned, his tie loosened, his body already decomposing. The coroner confirmed what the police assumed from the date of the newspaper under his hand: he had been dead for two months. The set had burned out. I realized that with only a prostitute in attendance at my death I would be no better off that this man. (Cockpit, 5-6)

Tarden fears that a similar fate may await him. In order to avoid such an ignominious end, he knows that he will need to form close attachments with others. As a former agent, however, he cannot. He instinctively distrusts other people's intentions. This lesson, drilled into Tarden in childhood, becomes reinforced by something that happens while he is at university. After his arrival in America, Tarden shares an apartment with a man named Robert. Unaware (or more likely unwilling to see) that his roommate is suffering from a severe mental illness, Tarden ignores a number of subtle clues that something is wrong with his friend. One day, after he discontinues both his medication and his psychotherapy, Robert attempts to decapitate Tarden. Although the police eventually intercede, saving Tarden and subduing Robert, Tarden is deeply affected by the experience. Robert's breakdown fits perfectly with Tarden's world-view: other people's motivations and thoughts are eternally unknowable. Tarden could detect nothing out of the ordinary with Robert, right up to the moment that Robert attempted to kill him. He goes through the rest of his life with the assumption that others are like Robert, always

hiding their true selves and (under the correct circumstances) capable of anything. Tarden finds it prudent not to trust. It seems safer to coerce people into doing what he wants, rather than to take it on faith that their purposes are honorable.

Even when Tarden's manipulations go exactly as planned, and he appears to get what he wants, the experience is often unfulfilling. While visiting a ski resort, for example, Tarden painstakingly perfects a dangerous stunt for the purpose of distracting people from his less than world class skills at slalom and downhill racing. He then persuades his main rivals at the resort to attempt his stunt rather than compete in an area where they might embarrass Tarden. At the end of the competition, Tarden wins his wager while the other competitors are hospitalized with serious injuries. Tarden's victory on the slopes is only partial, however, since the female protagonist of the story (whom he is hoping will be impressed) will not leave with him after the last fatal stunt. This pattern of hollow victories recurs throughout *Cockpit*, especially with regard to Tarden's relations with women. In a scene reminiscent of the freak show in *Steps*—where a woman copulates with a large animal—Tarden becomes intrigued with a performer he sees at a gambling resort. The woman's part in the performance is totally passive: standing perfectly still while her father throws oversized cast-iron horseshoes at her head. When Tarden expresses romantic interest, the woman wagers that he does not have the courage to assume her place in the act. If he wins the bet, the woman promises Tarden that he may spend the evening with her. Against his better judgment, Tarden accepts (and wins) the bet, but he is never able to collect his prize. It turns out that the woman has a hereditary medical condition which makes sex physically impossible. Once again, Tarden thinks he has won, but is mistaken. Despite his best efforts, he has been manipulated and outsmarted fairly easily. Moreover, he has risked his life for no obvious gain.[2]

[2]Of course, the latter instance is also indicative of Tarden's fascination with physiological deviance, which will be explored further on in this chapter.

While Tarden's actions are calculated to demonstrate his mastery of events, they frequently have the opposite effect, making him appear pitiable. For example, when he attends a party at the home of a social poser, a man trying to impress his guests by renting important pieces of art, Tarden decides to teach the man a lesson. He pries one of the rented paintings out of its frame, rolls it up and smuggles it out of his host's home in the sleeve of an overcoat. In this case, there has been no transgression, real or perceived, against the protagonist. Tarden steals the painting—and then mails it back—on a whim, simply because he can. Much of *Cockpit* has this feeling about it: that for all Tarden's planning, his schemes never accomplish terribly much. Their main purpose is to demonstrate his continuing mastery of the wheel game. The ongoing personal cost to Tarden is considerable: his need to play games crowds out everything else. Obsessed with winning, Tarden remains very much an insecure child, struggling to achieve emotional maturity. His coercive games fail to fill the void left by his brutal wartime childhood. Alarming his host by pilfering his rented art demeans both men, but does not add meaning to Tarden's existence, nor does it facilitate his reintegration into society. Of what value is Tarden's photographic memory if all it contains is a record of all of his most underhanded tricks? At some point, he must examine the manner in which he has expended his life. When he does he will find that his games and schemes have done little or nothing to redress his insecurities.

Tarden's control of each situation is predicated upon knowing exactly what makes other people tick. In part because of his emotional vacuity, Tarden finds it almost ridiculously easy to pick apart other people's motivations. At one point he undertakes an analysis of an author's lifework, not because he admires the man's prose, but because he wishes to see how powerful a weapon his own mind could potentially become:

> Surrounded by the man's collected works, I began reading.
> Soon my mind took off, soaring above the jumble of words,

> expressions and notions, which slowly became abstracted into predictable patterns, just as rough farm fields seen from the air look like a neatly sown quilt of velvet smooth patches. As I read, I dictated brief bursts of thoughts into a tape recorder. Only when I finished scanning everything the writer had produced, did I become aware of how flat and unchallenging the topography of his work was. (Cockpit, 101)

Although Tarden could have brought his considerable intellectual prowess to bear on any topic, he seems to have a natural aptitude for tearing apart other people's lives and work. His analysis is not designed to yield valuable insights into the author or his oeuvre. What interests Tarden is whether or not he can accurately predict the workings of another man's mind. This is what he was after in the first place: a new way of attacking potential enemies. His deconstruction of the author's work proves that he is capable of building an intellectual relief map based on other people's thoughts and ideas. The author's books act as a passport into his soul. Tarden knows that once he understands another man's motivations, that man can be manipulated, practically at will. Tarden is not only effective at getting inside other people's heads, but he also possesses a special talent for uncovering secrets. For example, by deducing that a local reporter has been plagiarizing the work of a number of foreign journalists, he is able to ensure that the writer can be impelled to become an informer. This sort of activity, figuring out and managing other people, comes so easily to Tarden that he cannot conceive of living in any other way. Even after his retirement from the Service, he intuitively seeks out and exploits other people's weaknesses. Beyond this capacity for manipulation, however, Tarden is ultimately unable to find constructive outlets for his intellectual gifts. Even his photographic memory, which he claims is "more accurate and explicit" than any snapshot, fails to bring him the control he seeks. (Cockpit, 13) The vividness and precision of Tarden's recollections cause him anguish. Because he cannot forget anything that he has seen or experienced, the traumas of his early life remain eternally fresh.

Tarden's determination to have his way, to succeed in every situation, and to use every resource at his disposal in order to ensure victory, leads to tremendous frustration. No amount of control is ever enough and he cannot determine when another person might choose to act against his interests. In Tarden's mind, there are only two kinds of people: those he can control and those he cannot. Terrible things typically befall all those in the latter category. His relationship with Veronika is a case in point. When he first meets her, Veronika is a plain looking but charismatic divorcee actress looking to move up in the world. In return for an introduction to a wealthy bachelor who might provide her with the comfortable lifestyle she seeks, Veronika agrees to make herself 'unconditionally available' to Tarden for his sexual gratification. (Cockpit, 238) In essence, she signs away her right to ever say "No" to Tarden. Tarden makes clear that dire consequences will ensue in the event she abrogates any of the terms of their arrangement. He does this by showing Veronika newspaper clippings of unlikely accidents which have befallen other women. Clearly he has entered into similar agreements with other women in the past. Despite his admonitions, Veronika goes ahead with the marriage and then attempts to renege on her arrangement with Tarden. Tarden's obsession with control precludes his allowing her to peaceably leave his sphere. Her breach is a challenge which cannot be ignored. Shunted aside, Tarden instinctively strikes back.

The gang rape scene that ensues, with Veronika receiving the so-called "bathroom treatment" from three filthy derelicts, remains ominously ill-defined. In this way, each reader may decide for himself or herself the appropriate degree of horror. Veronika endures her punishment, clearly hoping that Tarden will now allow her to go her own way. Though the reader might suspect that Tarden would appreciate a woman so similar in demeanor to himself, who will not be dissuaded from her plans no matter how unpleasant the consequences, this is not the case. Tarden "cannot accept the equality of someone else's imaginative ventures with his own." (Bruss 1981, 212) Only after

Veronika believes that she has exhausted Tarden's resolve and ostensibly won their battle of wills does he decide to eliminate her. Realizing that she has become his equal or superior—in terms of her ruthless determination to do as she pleases—Tarden perceives Veronika as a threat. Her ego has grown by leaps and bounds in the short time he has known her. Studying Tarden has taught her how to manipulate others into giving her exactly what she wants. Veronika begins making her own plans—and they do not include Tarden. Veronika is emboldened: nothing frightens her. Even after Tarden confronts Veronika about her plans to have her husband murdered, she remains unruffled. Displaying a nearly Tarden-esque arrogance, she denies nothing, calmly reporting that she has prepared for this scenario:

> Playing with her wine glass, she whispered that she could afford the best lawyers. Circumstantial evidence might prove her guilt, but she would never be convicted. Moreover, she would exploit the trial, monopolizing the media and exciting the world's imagination. The case would be priceless publicity for her budding literary career. She had worked hard on her image, she continued, and a trial would only magnify her status. Vindicated and triumphant, she would be free to do anything she pleased.
> (Cockpit, 252-253)

Veronika has opted out of Tarden's wheel game and started her own. Tarden resents being played for a fool, but he realizes that there may be broader implications. If Veronika thinks nothing of sacrificing a spouse who has outlived his usefulness, a similar fate surely awaits Tarden, who knows her origins and conspired with her to invent an identity which would attract an appropriate mate. Only his death will ensure the continuation of her secret life. After witnessing her stoic endurance of the bathroom treatment, it dawns on Tarden that Veronika has been transformed into a female version of himself. In many ways Veronika's boldness catches Tarden by surprise. Tarden's power over other people derives from his capacity to hurt them. Veronika, however, seems nearly immune to

Tarden's threats. Tarden decides that the situation is unacceptable, but he has few options at his disposal. He desires her acquiescence, but he finds that it is beyond his control.

Convinced that the situation cannot be salvaged, Tarden finishes Veronika off by arranging to have her exposed to a lethal dose of radiation. Unable to control her, Tarden salvages what he can: Veronika is now another newspaper clipping with which he will convince others of the folly of betraying him. Tarden's experiences with Veronika reinforce the way in which he perceives the world. By allowing her close enough to know him, Veronika learned too much and threatened to defeat Tarden at his own game. Tarden understands the value of keeping people off balance. It does not make sense to allow others to know him too thoroughly. Through the continuous manipulation of his identity, he precludes people like Veronika from learning his tricks and using them against him. Control may be elusive, but he must still protect his life. Tarden decides that the best method to do this is by keeping his identity in a permanent state of flux. How a man is perceived will affect whether he comes to be accepted by others. As a child, Tarden perceives that his identity could place him in jeopardy. To save himself, he must be prepared to transform himself beyond recognition at a moment's notice.

SECTION IV - MORPHING THROUGH LIFE: TARDEN'S CHANGING IDENTITIES

In childhood, Tarden notices that people define each other primarily on the basis of external perceptions—and that once a man is defined, people rarely revise their assumptions about him. Tarden decides that whenever the need arises, he should be prepared to adopt radically new identities. Tarden sees his identity as existing in a state of flux. As a result, he arranges his life so that he cannot be easily categorized by others. Soon, everything about him is changeable. Out of fear that anything will ever be definitively known about him, he lives surrounded by lies and disguises. The price for this

sort of life is an inability to be known by, or to be intimate with, other people. Tarden does not permit himself to know anyone very well. Even if he wished to, the danger is too great. To survive from day to day, he chooses a pliable identity which he can adapt as he moves in and out of various social settings.

Tarden guards his existence with several layers of illusion. Because of this, no two characters seem to perceive him in quite the same way. Tarden's work for the Service becomes a sort of disguise for the "multiple and shifting selves" he seeks to conceal from the reader. (Lavers 1982, 100) As he moves between different vocations and changes his appearance and style of dress, he is able to gain access to places that would otherwise be restricted. For example, while cleaning various office buildings and later, impersonating a mentally disabled janitor, he is able to worm his way into a number of people's lives, in one instance discovering a publisher and an author conspiring to perpetrate a literary fraud. As Tarden reinvents himself over and over, he utilizes modest jobs as a passport into the lives of others. Veronika comes to his attention in this manner, as he is operating a copy machine in a law firm. The people whose lives he is intending to penetrate invariably believe his cover stories: they find it implausible that a man would go to such extreme lengths in order to achieve his ends. Tarden becomes his disguise. (Lavers 1982, 101) This is the secret of his ability never to be exposed as an imposter before he has accomplished his purposes.

The world of Tarden's youth—a brutal environment in which animals are routinely tortured for pleasure and people are persecuted, imprisoned and summarily executed for the slightest provocation—stays in his mind throughout his life. This is the first of many identities to come. Perhaps despite himself, he comes to internalize a part of this world. The shtetl-environment and the memorable minor characters who are introduced—such as the ignorant but athletically gifted 'Flying Gnome'—somehow define the man into whom

Tarden eventually grows. Among the peasants, Tarden first learns to expect the worst and prepare for the unexpected. A good deal of *Cockpit* delves into the early portion of Tarden's life. The primitive villages of his youth, when he was completely at the mercy of others, are an important part of the man he eventually becomes. After the war, Tarden displays dangerous anti-social behaviour: stabbing his nanny, attempting to kill a younger boy by dropping a flowerpot on him and making crank phone calls for the purpose of inconveniencing hundreds of people. He also sleepwalks. These events are all part of his haunted childhood. As he matures, Tarden has difficulty reconciling himself with his personal history. As a result, he spends much of his life attempting to deny this history. He begins a cycle of self-invention which follows him throughout his life. Instead of being defined by things he cannot control (like his lineage, his childhood or the inevitable deterioration of his body), he begins to think in terms of reinvention. His appearance—and as a result, how others perceive him—is something inherently malleable, something over which he can affect control. His many identities function as a shield, drawing attention away from his vulnerabilities.

Tarden's life, he is sure to tell the reader, depends on his capacity to "instantly create a new persona and slip out of the past." (Cockpit, 143) This reinvention is craftily accomplished by taking advantage of other people's capacity to see only what they want.

> Confronted with my camouflage, it is the witness who deceives himself, allowing his eyes to give my new character credibility and authenticity. I do not fool him; he either accepts or rejects my altered truth. (Cockpit, 143)

Armed with a variety of different personas, Tarden becomes both a "one man army" and "one man theater." (Cockpit, 143-144) He demonstrates competence in a variety of different roles. His costumes are a big part of his success. Knowing the cursory manner in which people ascribe roles to one another, Tarden goes to the trouble of having his own

personal uniform designed. A hybrid of several styles borrowed from a number of armies and transnational military organizations, the uniform works so well that whenever Tarden dons it, he seems to be absorbed within it. People are totally fooled. Since no one can be absolutely certain that he is not, in fact, a high-ranking government official or military leader, they must treat him with deference in self-defense. Tarden's suit so subtly combines features from other uniforms that no one is quite certain where they have previously encountered it—yet they feel certain that they have seen it before. Afraid of offending him, people resist challenging Tarden about his costume. It is safer and easier to simply accept on faith that Tarden is whom he appears to be. Tarden understands and anticipates the behaviour of others. He feels sure that upon encountering him in his uniform, people will immediately rule out malfeasance: their assumption will be that no one would go to the trouble of designing and producing a special suit solely for the purpose of getting preferential treatment in restaurants, avoiding queues in airports and being allowed to park wherever he wishes without getting a ticket. Tarden, however, would never jump to such a conclusion: he is always searching for other people's ulterior motives and innermost secrets.

Tarden's mistrust of others is thus rooted in self-knowledge, in the not imprudent assumption that people are continually bending the truth, misrepresenting themselves and embellishing or distorting various parts of their biographies in a manner reminiscent of Tarden's own proclivity for falsification. Tarden's escapades while in uniform are thus significant insofar as they raise questions about the process by which people come to form opinions about each other. Every day, people entrust their lives to men and women in uniforms, often without so much as a rudimentary inspection of their background or credentials. They take it on faith that other people are whom they profess to be. People are conditioned to see the uniform, not the person wearing it. Tarden's uniform "draws respect from the highest officers...It opens all doors for Tarden, makes him beloved by

the police, and affords him privileges usually drawn only by heads of state." (Karl 1983, 505) Why is this so? Tarden realizes that perception is so closely related to identity that even in the face of conflicting evidence, many individuals will define him on the basis of what he appears to be. In this way, his affectations, clothing and disguises are mistaken for an identity. Almost no one successfully manages to penetrate Tarden's distortion field to see the liar and imposter lurking just beyond the edges of their perception.

Tarden enjoys probing the manner in which people perceive identity. Confident that no one will ever see through his tricks and disguises, Tarden believes he can morph into whomever he wishes, whenever he wishes. A good example of this occurs during an airplane trip. Upon encountering a small Ruthenian boy named Tomek, Tarden cannot resist having some fun with the boy. Dressed in his resplendent uniform, no one would guess that Tarden's native tongue is also Ruthenian. In order to stop Tomek from jumping about and disturbing him, Tarden bides his time until the child's mother is not paying attention. Then, speaking in a whisper, Tarden threatens to feed Tomek into the airplane's turbines. When Tomek tries to tell his mother what Tarden has said, she does not believe him and accuses Tomek of lying. Tomek's mother has been conditioned to respond to Tarden's uniform "more than to her own son." (Bruss 1981, 204) To her it seems beyond the realm of possibility that this 'high-ranking' officer could possibly share her native language. The only logical conclusion is that Tomek's imagination has run away with him. Tarden immediately perceives the mother's "blind spot" and utilizes it to further terrify Tomek. (Bruss 1981, 204) After Tarden threatens him again, Tomek receives the same response from his mother. Finally, Tarden leans forward and tells Tomek that no one will believe his story because no one else wants to see Tarden. After this incident, Tomek will not be so quick to trust his mother's judgment. During this journey, he grows up considerably and begins the "expansion of his perception." (Bruss 1981, 204) In this

episode, Tarden clearly sees visions of the child he used to be in Tomek. He enjoys playing with the boy and making him reevaluate the nature of the world around him.

In *Cockpit*, the assumptions people make about each other often have the effect of rendering them vulnerable to manipulation. To Tarden, such intellectual shorthand is profoundly shortsighted. Above all, Tarden believes in knowing everything he can about his adversaries. If other people's assumptions are a vulnerability, then Tarden feels he has no choice but to exploit this weakness in his rivals. Tarden spends his life testing himself, getting ready to defend himself, should the need arrive. In a sense, everything he does in his day-to-day life is a warm-up for that inevitable moment when he might have to fight for his survival. Even his personal relationships are not sacrosanct: everything in Tarden's life always has a dual purpose. It is no coincidence that whenever the reader sees Tarden, he is invariably undercover, never "in a normalizing situation with family and friends." (Karl 1983, 505) Tarden conceives of life in transactional terms. Even friendships are not an end in themselves. They always serve some larger purpose. At first it seems as though Tarden is turning over a new leaf, but it soon becomes clear that his trips to a neighborhood bar have nothing to do with mingling. Normally Tarden avoids routine, fearing that it will make him an easier target. The bar is an exception. Tarden sees it as the perfect place to test out his new disguises. In order to fool the bartender and other patrons, Tarden can be nothing less than totally convincing. One night he tries out two new disguises. First he comes in as a common labourer and later returns as a crude Southern ruffian. On both occasions, the bartender does not recognize Tarden and forcibly ejects him from the bar. Even after returning without a disguise, the bartender still does not associate Tarden with the other two personas. It would appear that Tarden has successfully created two more identities with which to fool the world.

> On my way out, I heard him explaining to a customer who had witnessed the previous incident that this was the first

> time in his fifteen years behind the bar that he had had trouble twice in one night from perfect strangers. He blamed it on the fact that so many weirdos were coming to the city now to get drugs. (Cockpit, 197)

As an elite and high profile member of the Service, a so-called hummingbird, Tarden is trained to deceive. This becomes an important part of how he thinks. He is never comfortable revealing the whole story. Being a hummingbird means becoming an authority on when and how to deceive others. Every identity that Tarden assumes is a deception of a sort, since none of them are really him. Tarden depends on these disposable identities in order to survive. If they are not convincing to his enemies, he could lose his life. His assumed identities must leave no doubt that he is someone other than himself: in a sense, he must be able to fool even himself into believing his cover story. Tarden appears well suited to life as a hummingbird. He likes to test himself and life in the Service presents many opportunities to do just this. For example, during a medical examination to determine whether he is physically fit enough to work in the Service, Tarden is placed in a small room with many other men and told to dress and undress a number of times. While the other men become nervous and agitated, Tarden remains calm, shows no visible emotion, talks politely to others and follows all instructions. Since this ordeal is in fact itself a psychometric exam, Tarden typically records "one of the highest scores in the examination." (Cockpit, 60) In the idiom of sport, Tarden is a heads-up player, always aware of what is taking place around him and where his attention should be focused.

Tarden quickly adapts to life in the Service. For example, he knows that a hummingbird must be controlled and confident at all times. He is also aware that to think in terms different from his opponent would needlessly jeopardize his life. There can be no room in the heart of a hummingbird for pity. After permanently blinding another agent sent to assassinate him, Tarden cannot feel remorse. Aware that his armed opponent would have killed him without a second thought, Tarden remains dispassionate:

> The man was a fool. His dependence on a mechanical weapon made him ignore, and destroy, his natural weapons, his eyes. I, on the other hand, cultivate those self-protective devices. I hook my feet around the legs of chairs to prevent them being pulled out from under me. Entering a building, I always check to see if anyone is following me. In a theater, I sit down only after everyone is already seated, and I prefer to ride an elevator alone. (Cockpit, 165)

The implication is that the other agent's lack of originality is actually the root cause of his downfall. Tarden knows that even a moment's hesitation could have cost him his life. As a hummingbird, his primary concern is defense, safeguarding his life. Tarden knows that the next time he might not be so lucky, that a better prepared agent—one more like himself—might have succeeded where the careless one failed. To avoid being hunted and killed, Tarden lives a "mobile, anonymous, disguised life." (Lavers 1982, 95) Because of his situation, Tarden is continually on the lookout for opportunities to learn about and understand the world around him. He continually shifts his focus, seeking to appreciate how other identities might function, should he need to assume them. In a rather deliberate process, Tarden goes from insider to outsider and victim to victimizer and trickster to patron and back again. It is never clear which Tarden may show up next.

In the course of his travels, Tarden encounters fascinatingly different individuals, from a town of prostitutes who eschew vaginal penetration, to the Snapper, a handsome homosexual who starts off performing fellatio on his victims before biting off their penises. Sexual identity, especially gender, sexual deviance and deformation, fascinate Tarden. He spends time with transsexuals and lesbians and practices sadomasochism. Gender ambiguities and sexual proclivities enthrall Tarden because they affect how people are perceived by others. Moreover, ambiguities have the advantage of making it difficult to categorize people, an activity which hinders Tarden's ability to maintain his anonymity. At one point, Tarden invites a lesbian couple to an estate located in a small,

staid community. He wishes to play with the townsfolk's sense of morality and make them reconsider the narrowness of their worldview. In another memorable vignette, Tarden convinces a woman that his penis has been amputated. Only when he suddenly removes a restraining clamp and ejaculates into her does she realize that Tarden has deceived her. His explanation, that he wishes only to help her reach ecstasy, with no thought of his own pleasure, is patently ridiculous.

> She finally admitted that being aggressive with me had released her in a pleasurable way, and had let her feel more sensual than ever before. Her manipulation of me was more exciting that her passive surrender to her previous lovers; she said that any anger or anxiety she had suffered because of my deception was a small price to pay for her new-found freedom, her new sexual identity. (Cockpit, 142-143)

Considering that she has just been raped, Tarden's description of the woman's response strikes the reader as affected and improbable. He is clearly trying to sell the reader a bill of goods. Lying is an important issue in *Cockpit*. Tarden's outrageous stories successfully obscure his true identity. In some sense then, his prevarications are as good as any disguise: they serve the purpose of throwing everyone off his trail. After a time, it is nearly impossible to determine where the truth leaves off and his spinning begins. Did Tarden really maim the two women prior to Veronika? Did he actually escape from Eastern Europe in the cloak and dagger manner in which he claimed? How much of what he is telling the reader is bravado and how much objective reality? Some of the more outrageous rumours about Tarden, such as Valerie's assertion that he can perform fabulous, nearly Ron Jeremy-esque feats of sexual legerdemain, could be either lies or hyperbole. It does not particularly matter. Such stories present Tarden as he wishes to be seen. In his vocation, Tarden depends on lies and rumours in order to make his reputation every bit as much—if not more—than the truth. In the course of *Cockpit*, the real Tarden

does eventually emerge, but it takes determination for the reader to see through each of his elaborate disguises and to make sense of the games that he insists on playing.

SECTION V - PLAYING THE GAME

Throughout *Cockpit*, Tarden remains preoccupied with games. Everything he does has some connection to his participation in contests involving both skill and luck. Beginning with the Thule game that he plays as a child, he sees life as a competition to be won. Much of his time is spent evaluating his opponents' weaknesses and strengths. The various games that Tarden invents allow him to exert the sort of control which had eluded him as a child. It might even be argued that whenever the adult Tarden successfully competes against others, it serves as yet another attempt to redress his many childhood insecurities, to show that he is no longer a victim and can take care of himself. Tarden cannot help testing boundaries, creating challenges for himself. He wants to see how easily he may invade other people's lives, manipulate their perceptions and learn their secrets. Anything of a private nature is fair game. Being invited—or better yet forcing his way—into another man or woman's inner sanctum is the ultimate triumph. Anything that another character wishes to hide, Tarden believes is worth knowing more about. He enjoys testing how much he can get away with—how far he can penetrate into another person's existence without being detected and whether he can then impel them to do as he wishes. For Tarden, winning games symbolizes control. His successes have the effect of both dazzling and frightening those with whom he has contact. Winning is a form of intimidation. As the other characters realize the extent of his determination to prevail, it dawns on them that they cannot possibly compete with Tarden. Like a professional athlete, his life is predicated upon winning. How he achieves these victories is of little consequence. Of the many games that Tarden plays, his favourites always involve identity. Throughout the novel, he challenges the other characters (as well as *Cockpit's*

readers) to discover his true identity—to "catch" the real Tarden, if only they can. Will they ever see through his stunts, hoaxes and tricks or will his life remain shrouded in mystery? His games all have a "catch me if you can" quality to them. Who will finally figure out that Tarden is just a lonely child searching for a playmate?

Tarden's need to play games never wavers throughout *Cockpit*—if anything it grows stronger as the years pass. The most important game, the one that affects the rest of his life and acts as a unifying theme throughout *Cockpit*, is the wheel game, an energetic diversion of his youth in which he tries to keep a bicycle tire rolling for as long as possible:

> Whenever I rested and the wheel lay still, I felt impatient and guilty. Its very shape demanded movement, and soon I would leap up and send it on its way again. In the early morning, I followed it across withered fields, toward the misty blur of the forest, through the gaunt skeletons of ancient birch trees. The life of my wheel was superior to the lives of men and beasts: a dog would chase it only to surrender to its indifference; a tattered-looking crow would swoop down to investigate the mystery of its speed and then flap off into the wilderness, croaking his defeat.
> (Cockpit, 162-163)

Even at this tender age, the direction of Tarden's life has already been decided. The Tarden-child seeks control. Everything in his life, including the healing of his own body, is part of this battle. As observed before, Tarden feels ambivalent about the healing process. To him, it is both compelling and frustrating:

> Although I often tried to keep a wound open and bleeding, it always sealed itself overnight, challenging my power over myself. I hated the sense of an autonomous force in my body, determining what would happen to me.
> (Cockpit, 15)

This is one game that Tarden cannot win, but it seems to make him even more determined to control future contests. The object of the adult version of the wheel game—a game he can control—is to select "a life and enter it unobserved." (Cockpit, 163) The wheel game has an element of the "Price is Right" to it, as Tarden randomly decides who will be the next contestant to "come on down." Tarden finds this game particularly involved: as he plays it, new challenges always emerge. Depending on whose life he is attempting to enter, the game varies greatly. At the midpoint of the novel, Tarden decides to interpose himself into the life of a middle-aged saleswoman in a department store. She works in the luggage department and Tarden asks her to help him pick out some new cases. He asks to see many items but does not purchase any. Tarden studies the unfortunate saleswoman's reaction throughout the transaction, and because of her soft-spoken deference, Tarden later returns and buys several items. Then he mails off a letter using "stationery from one of the country's better-known industrial conglomerates" commending the woman's professionalism to the president of her firm. (Cockpit, 167) Though the letter could lead to the woman's advancement, there is a condescension inherent within the act of deliberately manipulating her that Norman Lavers refers to as Tarden's "patronizing meanness." (Lavers 1982, 103) The description of the saleswoman, as being very nearly intellectually dead from years of repetitive and meaningless menial labour, presupposes that she needs Tarden's help. Whether she wants it or not, he has appointed himself as her savior—from what he sees as her pointless existence. The saleswoman is relatively lucky: Veronika did not survive her turn at the wheel game.

Games—and winning them—represent a huge part of who Tarden is. In *Cockpit*, the competitions take any number of different forms, from sex games, such as the disappearing penis stunt, to athletic competitions, such as the death defying ski trick. Tarden loves these contests, which are really ritualistic experiments with perception. The games that he plays allow him to exert control. His victories, many of which are achieved

by underhanded means, are a way of proving—above all to himself—that he is no longer a victim. Tarden revels in competition. And he always plays for keeps. The games themselves are totally original, invented by Tarden for the purpose of demonstrating his superiority over others. The rules, however, do not much interest him. Winning is his only interest. All of Tarden's games tend to fall into one of two broad categories: 1) personal challenges, to determine the extent of his power and 2) schemes designed to challenge other people's established perceptions.

Throughout his life, Tarden instinctively tests limits. How will he get what he wants? And what will he do if someone stands in his way? He needs to test his capacity to influence the lives of other people. And on a more basic level, he wants to find out how much he can get away with. To Tarden, life resembles a binary equation: there is nothing beyond winning and losing—controlling and being controlled. As in the case of the ski stunt, Tarden attempts to create situations that will maximize his chances of getting what he wants. Established societal norms mean nothing to Tarden. Even his most blatant invasions of other people's privacy do not appear to give him pause. Knowing secrets energizes him. In a curious variation of the wheel game, Tarden takes pleasure in stealing people's mail. As in so many of his other escapades, Tarden begins by befriending a man who can help him—in this case a letter carrier. After making a copy of the man's master mailbox key, Tarden rents a postal uniform and begins driving around emptying out letterboxes. Tarden describes other people's mail as resembling "pages torn at random from novels: they reveal a lot, but never enough." (Cockpit, 170) The question is enough for what? What is Tarden searching for?

As with his extraordinary memory, Tarden hopes that the letters can serve as weapons. Armed with the intimate details of other's lives, Tarden intervenes wherever it suits him. No one ever raises difficult questions about how he came upon his information. Tarden

becomes the ultimate pretender. Because of his familiarity with their situation, people assume that he is somehow entitled to be interfering in their lives. He can successfully pass himself off as almost anyone. Freed of the time-consuming process of getting to know others, Tarden simply intrudes into the lives of whichever strangers most interest him. His theft of the mail confirms his status as the ultimate player. Tarden carefully scans each of the missives for potential weaknesses to exploit:

> Until now, in every mail collection, I find at least one letter that might enrich someone's life with an offer of a job, money, love. Intercepting such letters excites me because I feel I have found a magic passport to another's life, as well as control over that life. (Cockpit, 171)

Through the stolen letters, Tarden discovers a way of circumventing the usual process by which people become acquainted with one another. Tarden constantly hunts for shortcuts to intimacy. Finding one provides him with a visceral thrill. The excitement he derives from acquiring information to which he is not entitled is voyeuristic in its conception. Like a child, he wants what he is not supposed to have. And he wishes to know everyone else's secrets. Attempting to keep him out only makes him more determined to come in. While traveling in Italy, Tarden happens upon a small town, where all the prostitutes refuse to engage in vaginal intercourse. Upon learning this, Tarden's combative nature kicks in. He becomes determined to entice at least one of the women into violating her code. He walks about the town offering each prostitute many times her usual price in return for sexual intercourse.

> They all gave me cold, haughty looks. "No inside," every one of them sputtered, looking at me with contempt. Soon others learned about my predilection and jeered, "No inside," even before I propositioned them. (Cockpit, 98)

For once, Tarden does not seem motivated exclusively by lust, but rather by the challenge posed by the women's prohibition. He cannot easily accept defeat and the prostitutes have thrown down the gauntlet. Tarden takes their proscription personally, as a direct affront to his power. The situation, which others might simply have laughed off, is transformed into a contest where Tarden tries to find a way around the women's unusual rule. He finds himself in the ironic and humorous position of begging prostitutes to allow him to pay them for sexual intercourse—and being refused.

The episode with the prostitutes reveals one of Tarden's defining characteristics: an incapacity to take no for an answer. Whenever he is spurned or insulted, Tarden comes on harder. Rejection merely serves to increase his bellicosity. An example of this occurs when Tarden is on assignment at a conference of psychiatrists. After making a casual joke at the expense of a pretentious doctor, the man's new wife takes exception and raises questions about Tarden's credentials. Challenging Tarden only causes him to become more aggressive. The incident rapidly deteriorates into a battle of wills. Aware that the couple has been married only a short time, Tarden feels certain that the psychiatrist's wife will do anything to save her husband. Tarden perceives the woman's love as a vulnerability to be exploited. After convincing her that her husband may come to harm, the wife accedes to each of Tarden's sexual demands, including masturbating herself to orgasm. This episode is strangely ambiguous. By having the wife bring herself to orgasm, and engage in other intimate activities that as a newlywed she may not have yet performed with her husband, Tarden seems to be attempting to transmogrify her rape into an act of quasi-adultery. To get what he wants, Tarden typically attacks where his opponents are most vulnerable. In the future, the wife may not be so quick to openly demonstrate her devotion to her husband. It is conceivable that this incident—whether or not it is ever revealed—may one day lead to the dissolution of her union.

Tarden never tires of his wheel games. He spends his life dreaming up new ones. Tarden transforms everything into a game, even acquiring an apartment. Upon deciding that he must have a particular flat in a specific building, he sets to work in the usual way. After finding out that an elder bachelor, who rarely goes out, occupies the apartment, Tarden begins a campaign to prompt the man to leave not only the building, but also the city:

> Twice a week, he received a manila envelope from me, stuffed with newspaper clippings that were vivid evidence of the rising rate of crime against elderly persons living in the city. Other items dealt with the criminally negligent medical treatment offered to the aging, the skyrocketing cost of city life and, above all, the lethal effects of pollution. (Cockpit, 261-262)

In addition, Tarden puts the man on the mailing lists of several retirement communities. Eventually the bachelor gives in and moves to Florida. The superintendent of the building informs Tarden that the bachelor had grown disillusioned with life in the city. A recurring problem with the bachelor's television had been a critical factor in his decision to relocate. Fixing the set had taken a considerable amount of time and money. Then, only a few days later, the set was broken again. Did Tarden have any part in this? It seems well within the realm of possibility: vandalizing a television and bribing a repairman to do a shoddy job seem like the sort of tactics that Tarden would not have had the slightest compunction about employing. Indeed, throughout *Cockpit*, he does far worse with great regularity. Once again, Tarden has played and won the wheel game, appropriating another man's domicile without the man ever becoming aware that he was being subtly manipulated into putting himself out to pasture.

In addition to personal challenges such as the aforementioned episode, the other games which interest Tarden involve the manipulation of perception. He enjoys seeing whether he can alter the way others experience the world. He achieves this goal by challenging

established values, especially sexual mores. For example, while visiting a staid community, Tarden goes to great lengths to challenge the values of the townsfolk. Upon encountering a funky interracial lesbian couple, Tarden confesses his interest in "women in love" and suggests that the two women pay him a visit at his estate. Disarmed by his candour and intrigued by his invitation, the women eventually agree to pay him a visit. Tarden knows that within such a cloistered community, the idea of two women engaging in such behaviour is unthinkable. Tarden feels certain the men in the town will be so intrigued by the two lesbians that they will not realize that they are inside a 'psycho-drama' concocted by Tarden. To keep him abreast of how the scheme is unfolding, Tarden creates a series of listening posts around the estate:

> One night, five men came close to the main house. I listened in as they outlined a scheme to abduct the women and drag them down to the beach for what they called "fun and games." (Cockpit, 223)

In order to save the women, Tarden creates the impression that he has murdered them. Again he has managed to turn the tables while playing with the townspeople's range of perception. The men cannot report their suspicions to the police without admitting that they were spying on Tarden and his friends. Throughout this episode, Tarden seems far more interested in the men's reaction to the lesbians than the lesbians themselves. This sort of behaviour reveals Tarden's priorities. He loves creating new scenarios with which to challenge those he encounters. This even includes his lovers, to whom Tarden enjoys 'confessing' that he suffers from a weak heart. He implies that he might expire after engaging in vigorous sexual activity:

> Some first-night lovers have failed my test and run out, desperate to disassociate themselves from my death. Others less afraid have rifled through my personal belongings. One woman, terrified by my corpse, called her boyfriend for

> advice, without even realizing that she was admitting she'd been sleeping with another man. (Cockpit, 115-116)

Tarden wants to create new experiences, to challenge people and make them aware of the hazards that exist all around them.[3] Because of his early experiences, Tarden is only too aware of the cursory nature of life and spends much of the novel weighing risks. He becomes an expert in figuring out how best to manipulate other people's perceptions. One way to do this is to shake the foundations of what they fundamentally believe, to show danger where they thought there was safety. Tarden does this with his girlfriend Valerie. After informing her that he will be out of town, he slips back into the apartment and remains hidden, watching Valerie and another man spend an intimate weekend together. He surreptitiously photographs Valerie and the man during intimate moments and overhears their disparaging comments about him. When he later confronts Valerie with this information, she becomes convinced that Tarden conspired with her lover to humiliate her. Though the lover was uninvolved in this incident, Tarden does not disabuse her of this notion. In the future, she will be more circumspect in her dealings.

Tarden's schemes test both individual and societal boundaries. In the "Polish poison" episode, Tarden decides to create his own pandemic. Fascinated by a story about a rancorous scientist who breeds a dangerous new strain of hepatitis for the purpose of starting a citywide panic, Tarden decides that he will attempt his own version of the doctor's experiment. Wandering through several different supermarkets, Tarden begins injecting hundreds of food products with a liquid that changes color when combined with human saliva. Though the liquid is benign, mass hysteria ensues and unsubstantiated speculation begins to replace facts:

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[3]In this way, Tarden is similar to a future protagonist—Fabian in *Passion Play*—who, against his publisher's advice, insists on writing books about the risks of participating in horse-mounted sports.

> As the scare continued to build, other reports asserted that food products reached supermarkets already contaminated; countless people asserted that they had been poisoned by the substance fifteen to twenty minutes after swallowing the contaminated foods. They all agreed it caused shock, nausea and severe hallucinations. (Cockpit, 105)

While the manufacturers and retailers launch their own investigations, the media covers the story as a terrorist act and some mentally unbalanced individuals try to claim responsibility for the 'poisonings.' With what amounts to little more than food coloring, Tarden manufactures a crisis. He takes advantage of what he sees as a flaw in the system. Since no one really knows what is happening, it is impossible to know what to do. No one knows what to think. Is there a contaminant in the food supply? Is it lethal? Are there long-range consequences associated with exposure to it? People must now question the safety of their food, something they had not previously contemplated. It happens that Tarden does not wish to hurt anyone with his stunt, but his point, that supermarkets are dangerously vulnerable to such acts of sabotage, is well made. Had he chosen to use poison rather than a harmless solution, there could have been hundreds or thousands of fatalities. Tarden is interested in the power to create, alter and manipulate perception, not in indiscriminately murdering strangers. Knowing that he could have, if he so wished, is enough for him. Tarden enjoys the challenge of seeing whether he can persuade others to come around to his way of thinking. A good example of this occurs in the episode with the air force pilot.

Once he decides that Veronika cannot be brought under control, Tarden attempts to entice a fighter pilot into participating in her murder. Determined to kill her by having her stand in front of an aircraft with its radar activated—so that she will be exposed to a fatal dose of radiation—Tarden needs the pilot to show him how the system works. Tarden offers

the pilot a large amount of money for his help. When the man balks, Tarden explains that one way or another, Veronika is going to be killed. It is only a question of how:

> "If you refuse me, " I said, "I'll have someone wrap a heavy towel around her head to muffle her screams, and club her repeatedly with an iron bar until her blood soaks through the towel, and her skull, jaw and spine are smashed. Is that more merciful?" (Cockpit, 255)

The pilot must now consider whether or not he wishes to profit from Veronika's death, since she is going to be killed one way or the other. Tarden persuades the pilot that Veronika is just another unfortunate casualty among the thousands of civilians that his plane has already killed or maimed. Tarden quickly draws the pilot into his world. His offer makes it possible for the man to succumb to baser instincts which he was hitherto unaware that he possessed. The pilot is intrigued by Tarden's offer, and agrees to cooperate, but only up to a point.

> "I don't care what you pay me," he said. "I'll activate the system in the plane and I'll show you where the switch is which actually starts the radar, but I won't trip that switch. That woman is your target, not mine." (Cockpit, 257-258)

The hypocrisy of the pilot's position—that he has no problem helping Tarden murder another person, just so long as he does not have to trip the final switch—does not concern Tarden, who agrees to the pilot's conditions. Tarden gets what he wants. Regardless of how the pilot rationalizes his involvement, he has accepted monetary compensation for the murder of a complete stranger. At the very least, he is now an accomplice. The ease with which the pilot is co-opted into Tarden's master plan tends to confirm the way in which he already sees other people: as being prepared to hurt others, if there is something to be gained. Tarden can be very effective in challenging people's existing beliefs and compelling them see the world in his terms.

Tarden loves playing with perception. His camera comes in handy in this regard. While witnessing a car accident, for example, Tarden cleverly photographs the tragedy from a number of different angles. In some photos, it appears that the taxi driver was responsible, while in others it appears that the pedestrian was crossing illegally and was therefore to blame for the collision. Later, Tarden sells the pictures to both parties, ostensibly to help them with their court cases. (Cockpit, 207) In truth, no one's case is helped. Tarden wishes to make the point that true objectivity cannot be achieved: events are seen differently depending upon where one views them. Tarden's talent for photography offers him the opportunity to challenge other people's understanding. For example, Tarden invents a method of utilizing special filters in order to produce photographs in which he appears much older than his chronological age. This sort of experimentation is indicative of the kinds of challenges that motivate Tarden. He is always seeking out new ways to expand perception. Because of this, he likes to capture moments of either sexual frenzy (e.g. Valerie and her lover) or utter degradation (e.g. Veronika during her gang rape). The photographs he takes of a nameless prostitute, however, have another purpose: to juxtapose her vulgar and elegant sides, in showing how little difference there is between a prostitute and a fashion model. According to Frederick Karl, much of *Cockpit* functions as a sort of "porno fantasy" in which Tarden's confusion towards women is made manifest. (Karl 1983, 504) He likes the idea of a relationship, but is unable to focus his energies towards achieving a meaningful connection with anyone else. All of his life is spent alone, fearful of how others might mistreat him. His interest in photographing much of the sexual activity throughout *Cockpit* seems rooted in a masturbatory urge. This need to record on film everything he sees around him is but one of a number of similarities between Tarden and his creator, Jerzy Kosinski. The next section will explore the relationship between Kosinki's life and the fictional world of *Cockpit*.

SECTION VI- THE INTERSECTION OF FICTION & BIOGRAPHY

There is a question inherent in all of Kosinski's work: to what extent is he his protagonists? Or in this case, how much of Tarden is also Kosinski? This is a problematic area and one must be very careful when entering it. An occupational hazard of analyzing Kosinski's work is a propensity to confuse his characters with the man himself. What seems certain is that the dominant issues in Kosinski's life are often the very same themes that capture Tarden's imagination. For example, both share an interest in games, tricks and concealment, and are fascinated by identity, control and the manipulation of perception. Biographer James Park Sloan and director Jack Kuper, in his film, *Who Was Jerzy Kosinski?,* confirm that Kosinski utilized himself in creating the model for the Kosinskian man—the solitary main characters who populate and dominate Kosinski's fiction. According to Pearl Sheffy Gefen, "Kosinski delighted in dropping clues to his identity throughout his novels." (Gefen 1991, 232)

The question of where the author ends and his protagonist begins creates a fascinating tension in *Cockpit*, just as it does in so much of Kosinski's other fiction, especially *The Painted Bird.* Sloan describes Kosinski's books as deliberately playing "games at the boundaries of fact and fiction." (Sloan 1996, 327) The reader wishes to know how much of the author is in the protagonist every bit as much as he needs to know what motivates the protagonist himself. According to his friend, author William Styron, Kosinski was the consummate actor "and created so many different and varied roles for himself that you...never knew what person you were relating yourself to." ("Sex, Lies and Jerzy Kosinski") It is significant that this is also the main characteristic with which Kosinski has endowed Tarden: the capacity to rapidly disguise his identity.

Kosinski is renowned for encouraging and then subsequently denying "autobiographical interpretations of his books." (Taylor 1991, 27) What role, if any, did such ambiguity play in shaping *Cockpit's* narrative structure? Through a number of flashbacks, Tarden reveals the boy he used to be. The trauma of the war experience is what continues to define him, long past his adolescence. This much Kosinski clearly shares with Tarden, but where the rest of the novel diverges, to become a work of imagination, is not so easily documented. While a ravaged childhood is typically the starting point for Kosinski's fiction, what follows is often an ornate twist on his biography. For example, Kosinski served two terms as the President of P.E.N., an international association that works through diplomatic channels to free imprisoned writers. Likewise, in *Cockpit*, Tarden quickly secures the release of a man (who had originally defected from Eastern Europe but was repatriated against his will when his plane was forced to land in his former homeland) by uncovering certain unsavory details about the U.N. ambassador of that country and threatening to make them public if the imprisoned man is not set free. Tarden swiftly accomplishes what might have otherwise taken years of diplomatic effort. It is as if Tarden is doing the things Kosinski secretly wished it were possible for him to do.[4] In that sense, Tarden "begins to stand for Kosinski, to be a symbol for him, a disguise for him and the story of Tarden begins to be a spiritual autobiography of Kosinski himself." (Lavers 1982, 114) These uniquely reshaped pieces of Kosinski's actual life make up the body of *Cockpit*. Critic Barbara Lupack argues that Kosinski successfully employs this form of twisted and starkly passionless autobiography in order to draw the reader further into the text, by making him unconsciously assume responsibility for Tarden's most repulsive and savage acts. (Lupack 1988, 200)

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[4]The aforementioned example is also instructive insofar as it reveals the basic fear of all escapee/survivors: being either accidentally or forcibly returned to the place from which they escaped. Kosinski, evidently, feared both of these possibilities.

There is no question that Tarden starts off looking a lot like Kosinski, but then he is transformed into the "violent, vengeful, humorless" protagonist who is seen so often in Kosinski's work. (Taylor 1991, 31) Whether or not Tarden is a carbon copy of Kosinski, however, is beside the point. The place where they converge is more basic than mere behaviour, it is in the things they believe. They are both fascinated by concepts like disguise, domination, voyeurism, obfuscation, manipulation, self-invention, control and identity. They are both motivated by an overarching need to shock people into reexamining their lives and they are interested in the relationship between groups and individuals and how reality and memory work together to create perception. They are enormously determined survivors who believe their subsistence depends on successfully hiding from potential enemies. While Tarden is an inveterate prevaricator, Kosinski was a man who had "survived the war by living a lie." (Sloan 1994, 53) Kosinski certainly saw stretching and distorting actual events as being part of the novelist's job. (Taylor 1991, 27) Lisa Grunwald, a friend of Kosinski's, supports this view:

> "A lot of people were skeptical about his stories—his childhood stories, his accounts of night crawling—but I'm quite sure they were true, or more true than not. Like a great raconteur, he embellished, but I don't think he invented. (Taylor 1991, 27)

The term he coined, 'autofiction,' seeks to cross the border which traditionally separates life from art and memory from objectivity. In this way, Kosinski was able to weave personal experience, historical facts and outright fabrications into his fiction. Norman Lavers argues that sizable portions of *Cockpit*, such as the elevator episode, Tarden's ingenious hiding spots within his apartment and his late night sojourns around New York, are almost "directly autobiographical." (Lavers 1982, 113) There are many other examples of Kosinski utilizing elements of his own life in constructing *Cockpit*. In a June 1988

article in *Vanity Fair*, Kosinski refused to discuss the details of his escape from behind the Iron Curtain:

> "I'm not going to tell you my life. No, I write fiction, I don't write biography. I'm not going to talk biography. I managed to get out because I'm a clever man, and let's leave it at that." (Schiff 1988, 118)

Kosinski must have known that this answer was a beginning, not an end. No one, least of all his detractors, would ever be content to "leave it at that." It would enhance people's interest in his life and lead to further questions. Though it is impossible to know exactly what events led up to his departure from Poland in 1957, one thing is certain: Kosinski's subsequent aloofness (and perhaps deliberate inconsistencies) in discussing his life prior to his arrival in New York did nothing to dissuade his readers from reaching the conclusion that a formidable Tarden-like intellect and guile were necessary to effect such an escape.

Like so much of his work, many of the incidents in *Cockpit* start out as the facts of Kosinski's own life. Much to the young Kosinski's chagrin, his family was indeed resettled after the war. At the time, Kosinski was deeply frustrated by what he saw as his father's cowardly compliance with the government decree. That his father had little choice in the matter of the family's resettlement did not seem to have any significance to the young Kosinski. (Sloan 1996, 56-57) Other parts of the *Cockpit* plot which are said to be factual include Kosinski's intimate knowledge of the Palace of Science and Culture in Warsaw and the incident in which Tarden's psychotic roommate, Robert, attempts to decapitate him. Though it is commonly accepted that Kosinski was never an agent for the CIA, it is nevertheless true that he was sometimes accused of being one by his detractors. The choice to write about a protagonist such as Tarden—and the vividness with which Kosinski lays out this character's motivations—had the curious effect of making the CIA

accusation appear to be based in fact. Perhaps the place where *Cockpit* is most strongly influenced by notions of biography is in the characters around Tarden. The story of how Tarden arranges for Veronika to meet a wealthy man parallels Kosinski's matchmaking efforts between Ewa Fichtner and David Weir (Kosinski's stepson from his first marriage). Sloan maintains that Kosinski knew details about Ewa Fichtner which he used as leverage in having her visit him in Connecticut. (Sloan 1996, 313) The combination of these sorts of vignettes, so heavily rooted in autobiography, has the effect of making it appear that Kosinski was not so different from Tarden. From this intertwining of contorted facts and total fictions emerges a confused mélange in which the reader is never completely certain where Tarden's story ends and Kosinski's begins.

Theodora, the woman who makes it possible for Tarden to enter the Service, is an interesting case in point. Much like Kosinski's first wife, Mary Weir, Theodora introduces Tarden to areas of American life which would otherwise be closed to him. Also like Mary, Theodora is older than Tarden and dies a painful and lingering death. Near the end of her life, concerned that she is nearly past her child bearing years, Theodora reaches an odd agreement with Tarden whereby she will recompense him for his semen by providing him with interesting sexual partners. Later, when she announces that she is pregnant, Tarden believes that she has become delusional. Even after the baby has supposedly been born, the pictures she sends Tarden are reproductions of a photograph of a child from a medical text. This anecdote is a twist on the usual outcome of a Kosinski story, since Tarden's assumptions are ultimately incorrect. The picture was sent out to obscure the fact that the baby was cross-eyed, not to deliberately deceive. After her death, Tarden inquires after his son, but the lawyer handling Theodora's estate is no help:

> I asked about the boy's father. The lawyer paused, then said Theodora had not named him. Furthermore, it had been agreed that the child's foster parents would never tell the boy he had been adopted. After I asked where the child

> was, the lawyer said he was not free to tell me. (Cockpit, 70)

According to Sloan, Kosinski had told two versions of a similar story about his own life. In the first, he alleged that he had fathered a child "which was adopted by a family on Long Island." (Sloan 1996, 250) In the second, Kosinski alleged he had two other children, one with a young Polish girl and one with a chambermaid. That Tarden is unable to successfully trace the adoptive parents of his child seems especially significant in the context of the novel. Tarden does not seem very determined to find his son. The reader has seen how adept Tarden is at acquiring information. This is, after all, what a spy does. The abruptness with which he terminates his inquiry into the child's fate can only be described as conspicuous. It is difficult to imagine a man like Tarden playing any sort of parental role in a young person's life. Kosinski was also not interested in children, arguing that they required too large an expenditure of time and effort. This would hinder his freedom and create a relationship of dependence with which Kosinski expressed discomfort. (Plimpton & Landesman 1972, 184)

Throughout his fiction, Kosinski struggles with the matter of dependence. Issues such as aging and health recur throughout his novels. In *Cockpit*, Tarden continually updates the reader on his medical status. More than anything, he fears that his precarious health could one day lead to an "anonymous death." (Lavers 1982, 101) To Tarden, there is nothing worse. He needs to stay in control not only of his life, but also of his death. In order to ensure his survival, Tarden insists on a level of anonymity. He does not want people to know him too well, yet there is a part of him which cannot resist the impulse to both prove and reveal himself to others. Such contradictory motivations are typical of Tarden, and because they are so clearly something he has in common with his creator, they provide a useful insight into the conflicts within Kosinski as a writer. Once Kosinski

published his work, his life ceased to be private. People always wanted to know more about this unusual man. And they could not help but wonder where he converged with his protagonists. The way his novels are written only tended to add to the general confusion. Health, for example, remained an issue throughout Kosinski's fiction. In *Cockpit*, Tarden's medical condition has so much in common with Kosinski's own that it would not be a major jump for someone to think that Kosinski was writing about himself. Tarden has cardiac arrhythmia and abnormally low blood pressure, is underweight, suffers from mini-seizures and is chronically fatigued. Kosinski seems to have been similarly afflicted and lived in fear that he might one day succumb to a degenerative disease such as Alzheimer's.

Disguise is another area where Tarden and Kosinski share something in common. In order to forestall his being discovered as "an aging and sickly man," Tarden employs ingenious disguises and masks. (Lupack 1988, 199) According to Kiki Kosinski, her husband felt that the value of disguise lay in its capacity to permit people to reinterpret themselves. ("Sex, Lies and Jerzy Kosinski") Kosinski was especially uncomfortable with his physical appearance. As a child he feared that his swarthy features and prominent nose might betray his identity to the Nazis. Survival lay in being able to rapidly deflect suspicion. From then on, Kosinski toyed with various forms of disguise. Though Tarden successfully reinvents himself many times in *Cockpit*, the battle with his own 'decrepitude' is ultimately a zero sum game. Sooner or later his disguises and lies will fail. Then his true self will be revealed. Tarden so successfully obfuscates his true identity, that even after finishing the novel, the reader remains uncertain that the book has gotten to the bottom of this issue. One cannot help having a similar reaction to Kosinski the man. *Cockpit* leaves the reader feeling that he came close to meeting Kosinski, but not quite. In *Cockpit*, it remains unclear whether the life ebbing out to Tarden is physical or psychological. (Sloan 1996, 437) Though it sounds like a cliché to say that it is parts of both, in Tarden's case it is nearly impossible to differentiate what he is saying for

effect—to make others feel as he wishes them to—and what he is actually feeling. Tarden is a master manipulator, actively working to shape people's perception of him. In this way at least, his character bears an uncanny resemblance to Kosinski.

In a sense, the "bony old bird," whom Tarden is described as being, could just as well stand for Kosinski himself—indeed, the original painted bird himself grown decrepit. (Cockpit, 10) Like Kosinski, Tarden is fastidious to a fault, hiding all his personal documents in safety deposit boxes and carefully concealing all clues to his background. He continually employs misdirection in seeking to mystify potential rivals. His forged documents, disguises and his need to hide from others are all significant clues to his identity. Early on, Tarden realizes the disadvantages of being too open. His identity is never pinned down. Instead, his life is shrouded in mystery. Kosinski also believed in creating ambiguity, especially with regard to his origins. His friend Mira Michalowska described Kosinski as being "an absolute mythomanic." (Sloan 1994, 53) By his own admission—to Geoffrey Stokes long after the publication of the controversial 1982 *Village Voice* allegations about his use of editors—Kosinski had been hiding his entire life. (Taylor 1991, 36) Tarden also shares a number of other characteristics with Kosinski. First, he is a voyeur who enjoys playing roles, the more diverse and bizarre the better. Kosinski, of course, acted in *Reds*, but his most challenging part was "the role he assigned himself: Major Twentieth Century Novelist." (Schiff 1988, 116) In this sense, Kosinski's life can be viewed as an elaborate ongoing performance designed to charm and overwhelm those he encountered. Second, Tarden is fascinated by the way in which memory functions to fictionalize experience. This is an important theme in Kosinski's work since his fiction deliberately blurs "the borders between his biography and his storytelling." (Schiff 1988, 116) Indeed, even a relatively minor character like Veronika reveals, during an appearance on a talk show, that she is writing an autobiographical novel. The reader is left wondering whether this work, had she been allowed to write it, would have looked

anything like *Cockpit*. Third, Tarden wishes to affect control over and reshape the perceptions of those with whom he comes in contact. Kosinski shares this characteristic, this need to play pranks and create situations and probe limits, all for the purpose of making others reevaluate their priorities.

In an interview with the *New Boston Review*, Kosinski argued that he could not fully understand the disdain in which many critics held *Cockpit*. His belief that Tarden "might generate a feeling of optimism, a sudden inner statement in a reader" is a (perhaps deliberately) naive and yet combative and revealing critique of his own book. (Movius 1975, 3) For Kosinski, the main challenge of any novel lies in unlocking how best to shock readers into reevaluating their priorities. The thought process which would lead Kosinski to make this statement, in defense of Tarden's behaviour, is reminiscent of how Tarden might have dealt with negative reviews. By defending his protagonist in this manner, the reader is compelled to reexamine *Cockpit,* to decide whether Kosinski's claim, that Tarden's struggle to seize control and make sense of his life is indeed an inherently uplifting story. Though many see Tarden as a man deformed by his past, even those who disapprove of his behaviour will concede that he has managed to enjoy an enormous range of experience. The same could be said of Kosinski. In his 1988 article in *Vanity Fair*, Stephen Schiff argues that Kosinski's detractors, some of whom accused him of being a Tarden-like control freak, failed to appreciate the significance of his early experiences and their influence on his fiction. Kosinski's need to create a distinct identity or mystique thus grows out of his experiences living in a world where "any chink in the armour, any question about whether you were who you pretended to be, could have proved fatal." (Schiff 1988, 167) It is significant then that in *Cockpit*, Tarden unearths a literary controversy in which a writer's reputation is thrown into question. Utterly discredited, the writer opts to commit suicide. Indeed, "in Kosinski's fiction, integrity in perception counts for everything." (Bruss 1981, 209) Sadly, this vignette from *Cockpit* shares

something in common with Kosinski's ultimate fate in the aftermath of the infamous 1982 scandal.

SECTION VII - TRANSITIONING TO *BLIND DATE*

According to Frederick Karl, *Cockpit* and the other *Steps*-type novels are "great anal sagas." (Karl 1983, 504) The rigorously scripted and deliberately anonymous life that Tarden chooses puts him in a unique position to evaluate the fascinating interplay between individuals and their societies. As the quintessential outsider, he enjoys nothing better than ambushing others and confusing their sense of propriety. For example, after discovering that a writer and his publisher are deliberately perpetrating a fraud to increase sales of the author's latest book, Tarden quickly turns the tables, stating "Now I'm in charge of the plot. It's my novel." (Cockpit, 186) Utilizing a combination of creativity, gall, circumspection and proficiency with high-tech gadgets, Tarden attempts to master every aspect of his external surroundings. In all his dealings, Tarden struggles for the upper hand and the last word. He possesses an insatiable need to heal his psychic wounds and reenter society, yet his behaviour is so deranged that he cannot accomplish this end. Tarden's survival experience has shattered him, leaving him emotionally detached and incapable of functioning in adult relationships. His life consists of a series of ruthless and crude manipulations—what Tarden calls wheel games—in which he seeks to penetrate to the core of other people's lives without their being aware of his influence.

The control that Tarden so desperately seeks never brings him satisfaction. On the contrary, he spends his life seeking out new ways of staying in control. His existence is stilted and unnatural, devoid of spontaneity. Living his life in disguise, determined to let no one know him very well, perverts Tarden's sense of proportion. His paranoia comes to define him. His detachment grows so severe that he can only communicate through

merciless violence and sexual humiliation. (Fuller 1975, 8) Tarden hates feeling vulnerable and strikes back against anyone he perceives as threatening his autonomy. At the same time, he tries to seek out where others are most vulnerable. In *Cockpit*, Tarden is less a baneful secret agent and more a pathetic figure, abortively attempting to reintegrate into society. There is something of the cantankerous schoolchild in Tarden. The games he incessantly plays throughout the novel create an illusion of control, as though defeating others can somehow compensate for the suffering he endured as a boy. The adult Tarden, incapable of engaging in meaningful relationships, spends his life testing limits, creating challenges and broadening others people's perceptions. Even after learning other people's secrets, however, Tarden's lot does not significantly improve. All he has managed to create—or rather recreate—is the cold and brutal world of his youth.

Neither hospitable nor comfortable, Tarden's cockpit shares much in common with a prison cell. Such a tiny enclosure symbolizes the circumspect manner in which Tarden has chosen to live his life. Living in the cockpit protects him, but also cuts him off from others. The primary metaphor of Kosinski's next novel—as well as its title—is *Blind Date* (1977). Levanter, the book's protagonist, has resigned himself to the notion that control is a practical impossibility. Levanter experiences life as a series of chance incidents and random encounters. He does not believe that he has much control over the world around him. Though Levanter and Tarden start out life in very similar circumstances, they eventually diverge in their reactions to their survival experiences. Tarden learns not to trust. Levanter, however, decides that he must live for the moment and not dwell on his early life. Levanter eventually grows adept at accepting life's inevitable disappointments without a fight. He does not conceive the world in terms of victims and victimizers. As a result, he does not feel the need to dominate every interaction. On the contrary, he seems aware that a single-minded focus on winning every battle would ultimately prove self-defeating. The version of the Kosinskian protagonist

whom the reader encounters in *Blind Date* is a man prepared to reenter society. Levanter's basic appreciation of the give and take of human relations makes him the next stage in the maturation of the Kosinskian man.

To the adult Levanter, life is not a battle for survival. Capable of tenderness and compassion, he enjoys the presence of children, fights against injustice whenever he encounters it and cares about other people. Still, it would be incorrect to state that Levanter is an entirely new protagonist. He takes retribution on those seeking to harm him, enjoys participating in dangerous sports, occasionally utilizes disguises, plays tricks on others, tells stories and enjoys the affections of a number of women—so it is safe to say that he is a close relative of the protagonists who have been discussed thus far. In addition, his point of origin: a brutally difficult childhood, is something he clearly shares in common with the protagonists of *The Painted Bird*, *Steps* and *Cockpit*. Where *Blind Date* differs from *Cockpit* is in its more overtly biographical approach. Kosinski includes a number of controversial historical figures (e.g. Charles Lindbergh, Sharon Tate, Henry Kissinger and Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva), as characters in *Blind Date*. According to Paul R. Lilly, "George Levanter, much more than Tarden, represents Kosinski's attempt to dramatize the tension of Kosinski's present life as a writer: the pressure of public recognition, the special freedom of wealth, the commitment to certain public institutions, the problem of viewing his own experience as possible material for future writing." (Lilly 1988, 104) At this point in Kosinski life, nearing the pinnacle of his career, he created a character who was not quite so alienated or emotionally remote from those around him, a man capable of feeling connected to others. The next chapter examines the significance of *Blind Date* as a text of transition, as the reader observes the next incarnation of the Kosinskian man moving from outsider to insider.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE KOSINSKIAN MAN'S REEMERGENCE INTO SOCIETY: *BLIND DATE* AS TRANSITIONAL TEXT

SECTION I - REENGAGING WITH THE WORLD

In Jerzy Kosinski's sixth novel, *Blind Date* (1977), the reader encounters a substantively different version of the Kosinskian man. Unlike his previous incarnations, George Levanter has discovered that the battle for total control is an illusion. Though he is still very much a Kosinskian hero, insofar as his identity has been shattered by the survival experience, Levanter has begun to reengage with society. One of the questions that inevitably arises after reading *The Painted Bird* and *Steps*, is whether any of his protagonists will eventually manage to recover their humanity. In *Blind Date*, there is a perceptible movement away from domination and towards healing. This particular version of the Kosinskian man departs from his predecessors: whereas the previous characters were wholly consumed by their effort to remain in control—seemingly hanging on so tightly that they risked losing themselves in the effort—Levanter's experiences have led him to a different conclusion. He recognizes that, left unchecked, an interest in control can quickly metastasize into a full-blown fixation, eventually supplanting all other goals and ambitions. *Blind Date* effectively marks the beginning of a preliminary process of reintegration. Control alone is not Levanter's raison d'être. Instead, he embraces the idea, espoused by his Nobel laureate friend, Jacques Monod[1], in his book *Chance and Necessity* (1970), that life is merely a series of random and entirely unpredictable moments. Levanter's father takes Monod's notion one step further, arguing that

[1]This is the first of several occasions in *Blind Date* where Kosinski includes historical figures.

"civilization [itself] is the result of sheer chance plus a thousand or two exceptional men and women of ideas and action." (BD, 99)

Unlike the Kosinskian men who came before him, such as Tarden, Levanter's experiences have granted him a perverse awareness: he may only gain a measure of control of his life by resigning himself to the idea that control is a practical impossibility. In essence, he transcends the matter of control entirely by abandoning himself to the utter chaos of the world around him. In this sense, Kosinski seems to be disavowing the approaches of his other protagonists as being ineffective. Previously, the reader has encountered pathologically fragmented men, grievously wounded by their victimization. For example, in *The Painted Bird*, there is a moment, when the boy answers a ringing telephone and simultaneously regains his voice, in which it appears that he may wish to reenter the world. However, rather than talk to the man on the other end (the first person in years with whom he might converse), the boy puts down the receiver and instead begins testing his vocal acuity. He is neither prepared nor able to reengage and end his status as an outcast. In *Steps*, the nameless protagonist is a hollow man who seeks to protect himself by victimizing others. Clearly, his emotional wounds are too severe to even allow him to contemplate healing. Though Tarden, in *Cockpit*, is fixated with recovery and transcending his fragmentation, his dissociation from others, combined with his paranoid need to dominate every social situation, renders his quest futile. To him, life is a power game. For example, after realizing that Veronika has no intention of honoring their agreement, he hires a group of derelicts to gang rape her. He is simply incapable of relating to others. Control is everything. As she leaves Tarden's apartment, Veronika remarks that "she would never forget her blind dates." (Cockpit, 248)

The term 'blind date' connotes a social arrangement between a man and a woman, "generally an innocent and harmless affair—two people brought together by well-meaning

friends." (Cahill [1] 1978, 140) Traditionally, the blind date is a ritualistic display of optimism based on the supposition that each unattached individual has a suitable spouse—it is only a matter of finding this individual. In his 1977 novel, Jerzy Kosinski subverts the usual definition of this otherwise innocuous term, by employing it as an ironic reference to a serial rapist's favoured method of sexual assault. Because he always attacks from behind, the young George Levanter's friend, Oscar, cannot be easily identified by his victims. More than a sexual violation, however, the Kosinskian conception of the blind date is an extended metaphor for life: it has to do with how this latest Kosinskian protagonist sees the world. Levanter believes, as his friend Jacques Monod, that "blind chance and nothing else is responsible for each random event" in life. (BD, 97) Every encounter thus begins as a sort blind date with destiny, since one can never be sure how it will end. In Monod's conception, "there is no plan in nature...destiny is written concurrently with each event in life." (Cahill [1] 1978, 135) Much like the moment of Levanter's own death, the events of a person's life are unknowable until they occur.

Uncertainty and fear are the essence of the Kosinskian blind date. This idea—that there is no overarching plot to existence—is not unique to this novel: it runs through all of Kosinski's work. What is different is the matter of convergence: for the first time there is a philosophical confluence between Kosinski (as the author of a series of deliberately fragmented texts) and Levanter (as the first protagonist, outside of Chance, to abjectly resign himself to the randomness of existence). Whereas Tarden was attempting to master each moment, to shape the content of his own life, Levanter grows to accept that he cannot always substantively alter or influence the events transpiring about him. Tarden proactively opposed the notion of the blind date since his sole interest was in imposing order on his own life. In contrast, Levanter is convinced that Tarden's approach is an exercise in futility. While Tarden is a very closed character, even going so far as to inform

the reader that the name he assumes to write his book is not, in fact, his correct appellation, Levanter, by contrast, is undergoing a gradual process of opening up. The third person narrator discloses virtually every detail that anyone might wish to know about Levanter.[2] The fact that *Blind Date* rejects the notion of traditional structure mirrors Kosinski's own view of existence: that the concept of plot is an evasion of reality. Later on, there will be an examination of the convergence of biography and fiction in *Blind Date*.

To many readers and critics, *Cockpit* and *Blind Date* were so similar as to be virtually interchangeable. The source of such misapprehensions is easy to understand. Both books, after all, rely heavily on autobiographical material. And both are structurally fragmented books. At the same time, near the beginning of *Blind Date*, Levanter is seen engaging in cruel and lewd behaviours, reminiscent of Tarden. Levanter, like Tarden, has a considerable faculty for pranks and mischief. When a group of Soviet tourists ridicule his flamboyant ski gear, for example, Levanter flies in to action. Addressing them in fluent Russian and demanding their personal data, Levanter identifies himself as a Lieutenant Colonel with the Soviet Alpine Ski Team. In the space of a minute, he has completely turned the tables: the attitude of the Soviets has been transformed beyond recognition: from arrogance and disrespect to terror at the prospect of being reported to the KGB. This vignette is structured very deliberately: the reader must conclude that nothing has changed since *Cockpit*, but the narrator intervenes at the last moment:

> For a moment he felt sorry for them and considered going over to apologize and tell them the truth, to shake hands with them and laugh at the masquerade in which they had all taken part. But he knew they would not laugh: he would only be frightening them more. They would then be convinced that a man who spoke perfect Russian and knew

[2]Within the first few pages alone, it is disclosed that Levanter has been having an incestuous affair with his mother.

> Soviet jargon must be an émigré spy for the CIA, donning still another disguise to find out more about them. (BD, 23)

Upon perpetrating his prank, Levanter immediately has second thoughts. Indeed, he is described as feeling "ashamed and somehow unnerved by his deception" and is shocked that "the short encounter with the Soviets had resurrected a part of himself he had believed to be buried, the enjoyment of having certifiable power." (BD, 23) Even at this early stage, it is easy to see that Levanter is much better adjusted to the social world than Tarden. Aware that his natural inclination towards intimidation may not be productive to his purposes, he decides to use this skill with prudence. Terrifying and dominating others will not hasten his reentry to society.

At this stage, the main question to be answered is how *Blind Date* differs from—but also fits in with—the three previous novels that have been discussed. The primary focus will be on the matter of Levanter's reintegration into society. Clearly, he still shares much with his predecessors. For example, while it is true that Levanter is obsessive with regard to the settling of scores, he seems to have mastered at least some of his other, more Tardenesque qualities. While Levanter possesses many of the basic characteristics that readers have come to expect of each Kosinskian protagonist: independence, resourcefulness, determination and ruthlessness, he employs them differently. Levanter's efforts are not directed against society: rather, his is a war against injustice and in favour of the rights of individuals. Unlike the other Kosinskian men, Levanter falls in love a number of times, gives pleasure to his partners and ultimately reenters social life. His emotional injuries seem to be healing in nearly direct proportion to his reengagement with society. Even when Levanter commits murder, it is to avenge his friends and to punish the high-ranking officials of a totalitarian state. (BD, 40) It is hard to imagine Tarden being moved to action on the basis of such altruistic intentions. Indeed, any comparison with

the earlier version of the Kosinskian man illustrates how Levanter is becoming reoriented to society.

In *Blind Date*, Kosinski employs a much lighter atmosphere than in his previous work, as though there is inherently less riding on this novel. The previous Kosinskian men must often fight for their very lives, but Levanter's quest is less serious. At times, he seems childlike in his playful mischievousness. Kosinski's style of writing in this novel, employing a third person narrator and a less serious ambience, conveys the idea of healing that is not present in his other fiction. Notwithstanding *Blind Date's* flashback sequences, Levanter seems in much better emotional shape than Kosinski's previous protagonists. While the key to his reintegration is not entirely clear, it may have something to do with his sense of resignation to the inevitable, the concept of the blind date itself. The lack of an overwhelming need to effect control is largely the basis of Levanter's capacity to reenter society. To him, the imposition of a plot on the events of everyday life is a dangerous sophistry: he endures by refusing to look for discernible patterns in events.

The closeness of the fictional George Levanter to Kosinski has been noted by a number of critics including James Park Sloan and Norman Lavers. (Sloan 1996, 339 and Lavers 1982, 137) *Blind Date's* curiously autobiographical texture creates the effect of taking the reader into the author's confidence. Levanter's life functions as a loose retelling of Kosinski's own: certain plot points, such as the way in which Levanter encounters his wife, his affinity for challenging and dangerous sports, the famous people with whom he interacts, his atypical personal habits (such as his sleep patterns), the inclusion of his friends as characters in the text and his expertise in photography, are replications of some of the details of Kosinski's life. According to Sloan, "despite its conception as a novel written to a thesis, *Blind Date* did a remarkable job of documenting Kosinski's life at the time of his writing." (Sloan 1996, 339) Though this novel is not self-referential (in the sense of

immediately drawing attention to the fact it is a work of fiction), it does function quite differently for those readers with a prior knowledge of Kosinski's life and novels. There is a self-conscious construction to the narrative, which deliberately draws attention to Kosinski's personal biography. At times it is impossible to ignore. For example, Levanter's misdirected luggage prevents him from being at Sharon Tate's party the evening of the Manson family murders. Though this story functions well as one of a series of vignettes, each a blind date with destiny, Kosinski's insistence (on talk shows and elsewhere) that an identical near miss also occurred in his life is too important to disregard. "Few writers," argues Anne Knight, "have been driven to offer so photographic a self-likeness." (Knight 1977, 96)

What was Kosinski's motivation in creating a novel which included so many events and characters from his own life? To the extent that this is a novel of the growth and reintegration of an idea man, a kind of Künstlerroman (though Levanter is more raconteur than artiste), it is not surprising that the protagonist and author have moved closer together. As Kosinski's work evolved, his life more directly influenced the composition of his novels. Jerzy Kosinski, the man, lies at the heart of each Kosinskian protagonist. In *Blind Date*, more than any other novel, it is Kosinski himself who ties the book together, both in terms of echoes of previous works and in regard to the reader's knowledge of his biography. The biographical threads holding the fiction together, especially in terms of Kosinski's recurrent 'revisionist' views of his personal history, are important components in this novel. As Kosinski and the latest Kosinskian hero move ever closer to each other, it becomes advantageous to take a close look at Kosinski the man and author. Like Levanter, Kosinski himself seems to go through a process of reevaluation and reintegration, during the second half of the 1970s. The novel too traces a process of reintegration from Levanter's battle against injustice, to his capacity to connect with others, to his rejection of the concept of destiny. This brief detour into the shadowy area

where fiction joins with autobiography will make it easier to evaluate the complex relationship between Kosinski's life and fiction, especially as this relates to *Blind Date*.

SECTION II - BIOGRAPHY, AUTOFICTION AND THE KOSINSKIAN MAN

According to director and friend, Milos Forman, the trickiest part of interpreting Kosinski's books lies in determining where "his personal history" leaves off and his fiction begins. (Lavers 1982, 15) While clearly not autobiography, *Blind Date* has an uncanny capacity to put the reader in mind of Kosinski and his oeuvre. Indeed, it functions as an overview of Kosinski's life and work, to the moment of the publication of this 1977 novel. *Blind Date* is a kind of rough biographical road map to Kosinski's work. While interweaving his fiction with tidbits from his personal life is hardly new for Kosinski, this technique is extended much further in *Blind Date*. The inclusion of what James Park Sloan calls "transparently autobiographical material," alongside other vignettes (which are not necessarily biographical) "dares the reader" to believe that they might be true. (Sloan 1996, 149) For example, it is known that Jacques Monod was a friend of Kosinski's (see Kosinski's "Death in Cannes," *Esquire*, March 1986) and that the two men spent time together just prior to Monod's death, as Levanter does in *Blind Date*. However, most of *Blind Date* is not so easily pinned down.

While incidents such as the cable car assassination are unquestionably fictional, and the Monod episode is essentially autobiographical in its construction, there is another category of vignette in *Blind Date* (as well as scattered throughout the rest of Kosinski's fiction): the 'near-autobiographical.' This term denotes stories which are rooted in the biographical (and thus convey an atmosphere of authenticity) but are impossible to weed out from the fiction. They may or may not be true, though they still convey a kind of emotional truth. For example, Levanter's close relationship with his mother feels very

real, but their incestuous relationship is almost certainly artifice on Kosinski's part. His exact feelings towards his mother are unknown. Ultimately, it is impossible to determine how much of Kosinski's personal experience is included in *Blind Date*. Biography and fiction are so closely interwoven in this novel that trying to separate them becomes a potential trap. Kosinski himself seems to acknowledge as much in his 1986 article in *Esquire* magazine.

In "Death in Cannes," Kosinski introduces the word 'autofiction' in order to define the way in which his fiction tends to intersect with his autobiography. (Death in Cannes, 82) According to Kosinski, imagination precludes the possibility of an unbiased representation of past experience. Thus memory itself is a kind of fiction. (Sloan 1996, 217) Kosinski's autofictional approach creates an implicit tension between the reader's knowledge of Levanter's life and the relative mystery of Kosinski's own. Kosinski's purpose seems clear: he is trying, as is his custom, to confound the reader. As Levanter's life unfolds, Kosinski keeps the reader guessing as to how much of his protagonist's story—if any—is actually his own. At a bare minimum, the inclusion of markers (which point to both himself and his previous work) in this novel, make it difficult to accept Kosinski's contention that *Blind Date* was "neither less nor more autobiographical than [the] other novels." (Cahill [1] 1978, 136)

Critic Jerome Klinkowitz argues that there is a delicate balance in Kosinski's fiction as the "knowledgeable reader" instinctively searches for a correlation between the author and the life of his protagonist. (Klinkowitz 1985, 143) In *Blind Date*, Klinkowitz and James Park Sloan both note the appearance of a number of stories which Kosinski originally related as having happened to him personally. For example, in a piece entitled "Betrayed by Jerzy Kosinski," Klinkowitz recounts how Kosinski often impressed visitors by deliberately arranging to receive odd phone calls (which his wife would say were from Europe) in

which he would be ceremoniously informed that his mother was on her deathbed and he had to immediately depart if he wished to see her one last time. (Klinkowitz 1985, 136-139) According to Sloan, this story is based on Kosinski's own experience: in the early 1970s, Kosinski traveled to Amsterdam and visited with his mother for several days. This was his final meeting with her. (Sloan 1996, 307) A similar story, of being given one final opportunity to see his mother, appears near the beginning of *Blind Date*.

> Once Levanter left Eastern Europe, he could not return, and the authorities would not permit his mother to travel abroad. But when she had had several unsuccessful operations for cancer and all the doctors agreed that her end was imminent, she was allowed to meet her son in Switzerland. They had been separated for twenty years. (BD, 10-11)

Similarly, Levanter's interactions with various celebrities are fictional depictions of events which Kosinski had talked about publicly, both on television and in print interviews. In one such incident, Levanter attends a soirée where the Secretary of State (presumably Henry Kissinger, who often traveled in the same circles as Kosinski) is in attendance. At one point, Levanter observes a Soviet poet of his acquaintance exchanging wristwatches with the Secretary, as a show of friendship. After the party, Levanter is called in to renegotiate the exchange, since the Secretary's watch, a vintage Tissot (purportedly given to him as a boy in Germany), has great sentimental value to him, whereas the Soviet-made Pobyeda is mass produced and practically worthless. When Levanter visits the poet to exchange the watches, the man becomes incensed:

> "Who does he think he is?" the poet ranted in Russian. "Just because he was born in Germany and speaks with a German accent, he doesn't have to behave like a German!" He shouted that "pobyeda" might translate as victory, but it certainly did not mean the victory of pettiness over friendship. (BD, 153)

As the poet retrieves the Secretary's watch from a suitcase, Levanter notices an enormous number of other elite Swiss watches which the poet has duped other dignitaries into exchanging for Russian knockoffs. Apparently this is his modus operandi: he shames new acquaintances into surrendering their expensive timepieces in the guise of furthering international understanding. Presumably the poet later sells them at a tidy profit on the black market. Only after recovering the Tissot does Levanter learn that the Secretary had only recently acquired the timepiece, his claim that it held a sentimental value only a convenient ruse to abrogate an otherwise lopsided transaction. The implication is that both parties are equally petty and mean spirited. According to Sloan, Kosinski was brought in to help smooth over a similar misunderstanding that developed after Yevgeny Yevtushenko had traded watches with Henry Kissinger during a dinner party. (Sloan 1996, 308)

This incident in *Blind Date* seems authentic, as though Kosinski is opening up his life through his fiction. This feeling of merger, between the autobiographical and the fictional, is even more poignant when Levanter travels to Cannes to say goodbye to his old friend, Jacques Monod. Dying from a blood disease, Monod has become frail and developed a hand tremor. Levanter infers that his friend has only a few days left to live. Though Monod's survival could be prolonged through blood transfusions, he declines them. When Levanter asks him about this choice, Monod succinctly demonstrates antipathy towards the equipment which makes possible the prolongation of his life:

> "To be hooked up to life through a machine? he asked abruptly. The flame isn't worth the candle." (BD, 98)

"Death in Cannes" describes the courage with which Monod confronts his impending death and the reasoning behind his refusal of the treatments which would have extended his life. "Mercy killing interests me; mercy living does not," Kosinski quotes him as

having said. (Death in Cannes, 86) It seems appropriate that "Death in Cannes" is accompanied by photographs of Monod which Kosinski took during their visit. *Blind Date*, like so much of Kosinski's fiction, has an inherently visual quality. The reader sees images of brief encounters, as well as pictures of the rich and famous. By the time Levanter travels to Cannes to visit Monod, the portrait that is presented is of two chums saying goodbye for the last time.

According to Sloan, Monod's decision to terminate his treatment and to return home to die at his house in Cannes, while still in control of his faculties, is rooted heavily in the literal. Sloan argues that Kosinski was profoundly moved by Monod's death, primarily because he had lost a close friend, but also because he admired Monod's capacity to "control the terms of his departure from life and how remarkably, expressively alive he remained until almost his final moments." (Sloan 1996, 338) In the *Esquire* piece, Kosinski portrays his final visit with Monod in rather tender and whimsical terms, a celebration of friendship. Kosinski leaves no doubt that he deeply admires (and perhaps even envies) Monod's intellect and sophistication. During their visit to the film festival, in both the novel and the *Esquire* article, women and men find themselves oddly drawn to Monod, curious to know whether he is a distinguished actor or an important movie producer.

> At a gala after one of the films, two starlets asked Levanter who his handsome friend was. Levanter asked them to guess.
>
> "He's handsome enough to be a movie star," said one, glancing at Levanter coquettishly.
>
> "Couldn't be," the other argued. "He's too distinguished-looking."
>
> "The head of a film studio?" the first guessed.

> "Too self-assured," commented the second. "Studio heads only try to look self-assured. He really is." (BD, 188)

Kosinski's reverence for Monod is demonstrated by the extreme tenderness with which he writes about their friendship. Kosinski's prose conveys the essence of a true, functioning relationship. This sort of gentle kindness is atypical for Kosinski. It was not present in any of his previous novels. In *Blind Date*, the Kosinskian hero is seen to be in transition: finally learning how to function in loving relationships. No other protagonist, of those considered up to now, has shared Levanter's predilection. In *Blind Date*, Levanter even goes so far as to marry. Mary-Jane Kirkland, a character based on Kosinski's first wife, Mary Hayward Weir, is the young widow of a powerful entrepreneur. Although Kosinski has recounted a number of different versions of how he and Mary Weir met, her letter to him—praising the excerpts of *The Future is Ours, Comrade* which appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*—is always prominently mentioned. (Sloan 1996, 143) In *Blind Date*, Mary-Jane writes a similar letter to Levanter about his "article on the role of chance in creative investing" in *Investor's Quarterly*. (BD, 237) Like Kosinski himself, Levanter begins to enjoy a small measure of notoriety. Since his research might benefit from her personal library, Mary-Jane invites Levanter to view some of her case studies, which she keeps at her private residence. Levanter accepts her offer and also agrees to catalogue her vast library. By the time they finally meet face to face, Mary-Jane decides to play a practical joke on Levanter whereby she encourages his misperception that she is Mrs. Kirkland's private secretary, Miss Saxon. When the truth is revealed to him, Levanter is stunned: he has more than met his match in Mary-Jane.[3]

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[3]James Park Sloan argues that the loving and happy marriage portrayed in *Blind Date* is not, in fact, accurate. Kosinski seems to be reworking his personal history at this stage in his writing. According to Sloan, Kosinski's marriage to Mary Weir eventually ended in divorce. In addition, Mary Weir did not succumb to cancer, as Mary-Jane does in *Blind Date*. Instead, Sloan suggests that Mary Weir may have died of alcohol poisoning. (Sloan 1996, 261)

According to Sloan, many of Mary Weir's closest friends and relatives deeply mistrusted Kosinski's motives. (Sloan 1996, 164) Kosinski includes such a scene near the end of *Blind Date*. While touring the retirement estate of one of the Mary's friends, Levanter is informed by the host that he is not invited to share the man's palatial atomic fallout shelter, in the event of war. The scene has an air of authenticity, as though something like it might actually have occurred. The man continues:

> "If you're cooped up underground, six months is a long time," said the host, "and you have to know all about someone you're going to be cooped up with."
>
> "I understand," said Levanter.
>
> "It's not that you aren't likable, George," he said emphatically. "On the contrary. You are. It's just that one wonders if you haven't made a career out of being so likable."
>
> "I don't follow you," said Levanter.
>
> "You're a survivor, George. The war. The Ruskies. Parking cars. You've survived it all. And look at you now." He paused, as if to let the implication sink in. "Married to Mary-Jane, the nicest girl there is, who also happens to be one of the richest widows in American, with the most powerful friends around." (BD, 255)

The man intimates that Levanter is a professional survivor: though he met Mary-Jane entirely by chance, on a blind date of sorts, the man wonders whether "there was some deed, some awful price [Levanter] had to pay" in order to survive the twists and turns of a particularly uncertain and unpredictable life. (BD, 255) There is no way for Levanter to assuage the man's reservations regarding the nature of his character. He knows only too well that trust is difficult and must be built over long periods, and even then, may well be betrayed. Others will always view his ability to evade capture by the Nazis and his escape from behind the Iron Curtain as too miraculous to be taken seriously. It is easier to

believe that he had ulterior motives with regard to his relationship with Mary-Jane than to entertain the notion that he is actually in love with her.

The experience of marrying and traveling with Mary Weir had an enormous impact on Kosinski's fiction. As a result, Mary Weir-esque characters recur throughout his fiction: from EE in *Being There* to Whalen's mother in *Devil Tree*. Similarly, wealthy industrialists such as Mr. Rand, Horace Sumner Whalen and Mr. Weston in *Blind Date* are versions of Mary Weir's first husband.[4] These are strong, pragmatic men who simply refuse to accept defeat: they create their own destinies. It is important to be clear about the nature of what is being argued. Though they are not one in the same, the character of Mary-Jane Kirkland closely parallels Mary Weir. Similarly, Levanter, as the latest Kosinskian man, shares much in common with his creator, perhaps more than his predecessors. For example, when another character asks Levanter how he earns a living, Levanter takes on a very Kosinskian tone. "I do as I please," he answers defiantly. (BD, 16) When the man presses for a more detailed response, Levanter sums up his life in the following way.

> "I have always been an investor," said Levanter. "A self-employed idea man. A few times a year I come across an idea and try to sell it to people who might need it."
> (BD, 16)

This is a rather atypical and entrepreneurial definition of what a novelist does, but no doubt is an accurate portrait of how Kosinski viewed his chosen profession, especially when the reader stops to reflect upon how much of himself somehow found its way into Kosinski's work. Levanter is also similar to Kosinski in his involvement with Investor's International, a fictional organization that, like P.E.N. (the writer's organization of which

[4]Indeed, Kosinski seems to have been so enamored of Ernest T. Weir that he wrote an article in the autumn 1972 issue of *The American Scholar*, entitled "The Lone Wolf," in which he praised Weir's uncanny ability to identify important political trends before they occurred.

Kosinski was once president), is primarily concerned with stopping the abuse of human rights.

Sloan points out that *Blind Date* is significant, in part, because it documents Kosinski's friendships, during the 1970s, with the intellectual, social and economic elite of American society. (Sloan 1996, 339) In a 1978 interview with Tom Teicholz, Kosinski explains his decision to include these people in his novel.

> "....Characters such as Henry Kissinger or Charles Lindbergh, whom I've met and know personally are as well known by the general public, by you, as by me. You know them better perhaps because you see them in terms of the way they are seen, in terms of the collective fiction in which we all participate." (Teicholz 1978, 145)

Because he has not previously included representations of well-known individuals in his other novels—except a number of generic politicians, diplomats and celebrities——Kosinski's decision is significant. (Everman 1991, 108) Yet the reader should keep in mind that regardless of the quality of Kosinski's memory and vision, these are not in fact the actual people themselves. Instead, they are merely inventions of Kosinski's imagination: what Lindbergh, for example, might be like, if he were to interact with Levanter. Perhaps it might be more accurate to call the character 'Jerzy Kosinski's Charles Lindbergh.' In any case, Kosinski's versions of Lindbergh and Monod are no closer to—nor further from— reality than any of the other 'fictional protagonists' such as Nameless, Oscar or Foxy Lady. They are all inventions of the author.

This convergence of the real and the fictional is a vital part of Jerzy Kosinski's autofiction. No doubt somewhat sarcastically, Kosinski's own definition of autofiction spoke of "a literary genre...generous enough to let the author adopt the nature of his

fictional protagonist—not the other way around." (Death in Cannes, 82) In addition to Kosinski the man and his real life friends, there is a rather self-conscious referencing of his other fictional work in *Blind Date*, as though Kosinski is tipping his cap to what he has previously created. For example, during a taxi ride, Levanter learns that he and his driver are from the same town in Eastern Europe. It turns out the man used to deliver groceries to Levanter's relatives. He goes on to describe a peculiar child who lived in the neighborhood.

> "I saw him myself. He couldn't speak. Never smiled or laughed. Just kept staring at you. Their own maid was afraid of him. She told me he would sneak out alone at night and stay away until morning, then sleep during the day. A real spook." (BD, 106)

It seems likely that the driver knew the disturbed and mute protagonist of *The Painted Bird* and that Levanter is indeed the boy of the first novel, now in middle age.

> "Perhaps I was too young to know this kid when you knew him," said Levanter as he paid the fare. "But when we got older, I came to know him better. He was no crazier than you and I." (BD, 106)

Many images in *Blind Date* seem to evoke *The Painted Bird.* The character of Captain Barbatov, whom Levanter encounters when he is placed in an army unit for delinquent students, is suggestive of the ignorant peasants who tormented the boy in Kosinski's first novel. One day, while inebriated, Barbatov approaches Levanter and accuses him of being a coward.

> "Running away, running away!" Barbatov shouted. "That's all you Jews did for centuries. Even when the Jews in the ghettos finally rebelled and fought the Nazis, they knew they couldn't win. They fought to bargain. You hear?

> Always to bargain." Barbatov leaned down, his sweaty forehead nearly touching Levanter's face. (BD, 55)

Barbatov's drunken, anti-Semitic tirades, together with his deliberate humiliation of Levanter in front of the entire army camp, are reminiscent of the persecution that the boy suffers throughout *The Painted Bird.* The only difference is that Levanter is not a child, so he cleverly arranges to take revenge on Barbatov for his cruelty. In another scene evocative of *The Painted Bird,* the children at Levanter's elementary school enjoy playing the "Name the Jew" game. When Levanter refuses to join in with this intolerant pastime, he is surrounded by older boys. Resigned to a beating, a large boy, with whom he is not acquainted, rescues him from the angry mob. Levanter is grateful to his benefactor, Woytek, and they become friendly.

Woytek is reminiscent of the Silent One in *The Painted Bird*, except that Levanter chooses to keep in contact with his friend, even after they become adults. When he first arrives in America, Levanter characterizes Woytek's plight in terms which evoke the protagonist of *Steps*. "All Woytek is suited for at the moment is menial labor: parking cars, scraping paint off ship decks, [and] cleaning bars." (BD, 194) Of course, these are the very jobs that the protagonist of *Steps* labours at just after his arrival in America. After Woytek leaves Eastern Europe, Levanter is instrumental in finding him a wealthy American heiress, Gibby, to marry. In actuality, Kosinski did fix up a friend named Wojtek Frykowski with Gibby Folger.[5] Just like the fictional Gibby and Woytek in *Blind Date*, the actual couple were murdered by the Manson family.

Though Kosinski was not in Sharon Tate's house the night of the murders, he maintained that he would have been if not for a fortuitous luggage misrouting error which delayed his

[5]Kosinski also arranged for David Weir, his wife's son, to meet the woman he subsequently married.

trip to Los Angeles by twenty-four hours. (Sloan 1996, 274) In *Blind Date*, Kosinski postulates in graphic detail what the last moments of Gibby and Woytek's lives might have been like—abject terror punctuated by excruciating pain—just prior to their deaths. Once again, Kosinski's fiction skillfully manages to straddle the line between life and art. In Kosinski's autofiction, the final horrific moments of their lives are a blind date with destiny, just as Levanter's delayed trip—which saves his life—is another sort. This is a propitious point at which to begin an exploration of the blind date motif.

SECTION III - LIFE IS THE BLIND DATE

In Kosinski's fiction, there is not a traditional antagonist as such. The protagonists of all his fiction, from *The Painted Bird* onward, are inevitably portrayed as locked in a life and death struggle against chance or luck. In *Blind Date*, what has changed is that the protagonist now recognizes that each moment is potentially his last. Up to and including his final moments, freezing to death during an unexpectedly fierce snowstorm, Levanter has surrendered himself to the inevitability of the blind date. He cannot resist its inherent truth. Throughout the novel, Levanter has many such close calls. To him, life is essentially an improvisational drama in which each man is the "main protagonist—but only of the moment." (Cahill [2] 1978, 34) While the other protagonists struggle against and seek to control the randomness which surrounds them, Levanter "accepts the role that blind chance plays in his life." (Everman 1991, 116)

As was previously discussed, the concept of the blind date is not unique to Kosinski's 1977 novel. For example, in *Cockpit*, Tarden often finds himself at the mercy of chance. Despite elaborate preparations to ensure his safety, he nearly dies in a dentist's office, finds himself imprisoned in a runaway elevator, is unexpectedly immobilized by a psychotic man, has an potentially fatal reaction to an antibiotic and narrowly escapes

decapitation at the hands of his otherwise mild-mannered roommate. As the Kosinskian man grows ever more fixated with control, his preparations to ensure his safety are often shown to be ineffective. Similar incidents recur throughout Kosinski's fiction. The Kosinskian protagonists are mindful of the risks posed both by everyday life and in the case of Tarden, by the danger of his work. Tarden, like Levanter, is cognizant of the concept of the blind date. Where the two protagonists differ is in how they react to the blind dates with which they are confronted. Tarden is prepared to struggle endlessly, whereas Levanter has resigned himself to the forces, often random and mysterious, which lie outside his control.

When the blind date recurs, as it never fails to in Kosinski's fiction, Levanter seems to have been expecting it all along. It is almost as though he wonders why blind dates, such as his random encounter with Stalin's daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, do not occur more frequently. In Kosinski's fiction, blind dates are of two types: prophetic coincidences which shape the course of a character's life and unexpectedly dangerous or brutal encounters which could result in death. Near the beginning of *Cockpit*, for example, Tarden is driving through a resort when he notices an unusual automobile. Since there is a renegade agent who drove such a car, Tarden follows the car and after locating the agent in a remote mountain village, quickly eliminates him. Afterward, Tarden learns that the man was not, in fact, the owner of the sports car. Moreover, the renegade agent had not owned this sort of car for many years. The entire incident, one of Tarden's greatest triumphs during his career in the Service, is the result of a complex string of coincidences. It was Tarden's error, mistaking one man for another, which led him to the agent. When Tarden tries to explain this stroke of luck to his controller, the man remains incredulous: he suspects that Tarden is protecting his sources and that locating the agent had nothing whatever to do with happenstance. The controller is wedded to the assumption that a unified plot determines what happens around him. He is too busy composing and then

imposing his own story line on a situation in which one did not exist to listen to—much less believe—Tarden's explanation. *Blind Date* is replete with similar episodes, such as Levanter's chance encounter with his old friend Romarkin (on the street in Paris, twenty-five years after Romarkin is banished to Siberia for asking an inopportune question about Stalin in a linguistics seminar) and his unlikely reunion with Pauline (after chancing to see a poster advertising her upcoming appearance at Carnegie Hall).

Not all of Levanter's blind dates are as satisfying. In the aftermath of his friends' murder by the Manson family, Levanter must reevaluate his life. The unlikelihood of the massacre in the first place, combined with his misdirected luggage, leaves Levanter wondering why he was spared. He becomes disconsolate, his sorrow compounded by survivor's guilt and perplexity over the pure savagery of these attacks. In a 1978 interview with Daniel Cahill, Kosinski explains why he felt compelled to include the Manson affair as part of *Blind Date*:

> The victims of Manson typify, to me, the terrifying randomness of our modern existence. By including the fateful encounter of the victims with their killers, I wish the reader to be able to visualize, to recreate, an atmosphere of serenity, peace, and prosperity brutally invaded by a gang of murderers who come to the house by chance to kill everyone in it. (Cahill [1] 1978, 137)

After narrowly escaping the Manson massacre, Levanter begins to wonder what terrible secrets and unspeakable urges lurk within the psyche of each man. He reaches the conclusion that because he will never fully comprehend what motivates others, he must cede the objective of controlling each moment of his existence, the Kosinskian man's primary goal up to this point. Because blind dates with destiny seemingly lie around each corner, he makes the difficult decision to surrender control, rather than fight a futile battle to retain it. In addition to the murder of his friends, what most influences Levanter's

philosophy of life is his interactions with Jacques Monod. In *Blind Date*, the Monod character lays out the philosophy by which he lives by contrasting himself with Levanter's friend, Romarkin:

> "Even now, in France," Monod said, "your friend Romarkin doesn't dare to admit that blind chance and nothing else is responsible for each random event of his life. Instead, he is searching for a religion that, like Marxism, will assure him that man's destiny is spelled out in the central plot of life. Meanwhile, believing in the existence of an orderly, predetermined life scheme, Romarkin by-passes the drama of each unique instance of his own existence. Yet, to accept a notion of destiny, he might as well believe in astrology, or palm reading, or pulp novels, all of which pretend that one's future is already set and needs only to be lived out."
> (BD, 97-98)

The implication is that Romarkin does not understand that life itself is merely the result of random chance: a series of unrelated incidents. The search for meaning must ultimately end in failure, since there is no purpose to be revealed. Monod's resolute belief is that there is no destiny. Each moment exists by itself and is unconnected to anything around it. The structure of *Blind Date* is set up to reflect this idea. The flashbacks into Levanter's past life are much less numerous and less vividly and brutally portrayed than those of the previous Kosinskian men. Levanter travels far and wide, meets many people and does many things, yet in the end, the book ends where it begins: with yet another unexpected turn of events, this one fatal. The irony is that Levanter is oddly prepared for his death, since he does not believe in the idea of plot. Events simply occur and possess no hidden significance, apart from the meaning that people themselves ascribe to them. Ultimately, Levanter will not allow his early survival experience (to which he eludes during the taxi ride and in his argument with Captain Barbatov) to poison his life. Unlike those around him, Levanter does not allow his past to determine his present. (Everman 1991, 105)

While a character such as Tarden cannot bear the idea of losing control of his life, Levanter sees the pursuit of such power as a waste of time: to him, control is a mirage.

In *Blind Date*, the notion of destiny is portrayed as being utterly naïve and misguided. Frederick Karl argues that Kosinski's novel functions as an admonition against "substituting man-made order" or "life plots" for chance. (Karl 1983, 152) The series of blind dates which make up Levanter's life are fascinating in their diversity. As they occur, their significance is not always apparent. Like the protagonist, the reader must wait to ascertain their ultimate meaning. For example, as a boy, as Levanter is boarding the train for his journey to a state sponsored Youth Movement camp, his suitcase falls under the train. This seemingly innocuous accident is the starting point for a series of unlikely events which profoundly affect the lives of three people. Oscar's kindness to Levanter acts as the catalyst in a rapidly developing friendship between the boys. It turns out that Oscar is a rapist who feels a need to brag to Levanter about his elaborately organized—and virtually foolproof— system of sexual assault. Wanting to test Oscar's method, Levanter rapes a beautiful young girl he dubs Nameless. Already aware of his previous modus operandi, the police arrest Oscar for Levanter's crime. Although Levanter tries to own up to his crime, the police and camp director do not believe him. The story, however, does not end there.

After camp ends, Levanter meets Nameless at a school dance and they hit it off. Levanter soon finds himself caring about Nameless. When she eventually discovers that Levanter, and not Oscar, was her assailant, she is enraged. She does not alert the authorities, but it is clear that she cannot live with the knowledge that there are (at least for her) two Levanters: a lover and rapist. Levanter is left to ponder what might have been: selling himself short, by believing that Nameless would never permit him the opportunity to

love her, may well have sabotaged his best opportunity for love.[6] The episode with Nameless, a double blind date with destiny, leaves the reader feeling empty. Levanter has been deprived of something important. And it was not an enemy who took this opportunity from Levanter: he somehow managed to do this to himself. After Nameless runs off, the reader cannot help but ponder the innumerable ways in which all people sabotage their lives. Before it occurred, Levanter had no way of knowing that Nameless would eventually permit him into her life. This incident convinces him that 'happily ever after' does not exist. There is no plot governing how anything evolves. Instead, life is made up of interesting, though largely unrelated, vignettes of experience. In a lifetime, there are many different sorts of blind dates, some of which may change the direction of a person's life. Levanter's incestuous relationship with his mother is a case in point.

While in high school, Levanter's father suffers a severe stroke and is hospitalized. Each morning, the nurse on duty at the hospital calls his mother to update his father's condition. Like many other incidents in this novel, what happens next is unplanned.

> From his room, Levanter could hear the phone ring in his mother's bedroom and then, almost immediately, the sound of her anxious voice. One day, the ringing went on and on. Levanter jumped out of bed and, without even putting his bathrobe over his naked body, ran to answer it. He was picking up the receiver when his mother rushed into the room, her skin wet from the shower, and took the phone from him. She made no attempt to cover herself with the towel in her hand or to reach for the robe hanging over the foot of her bed. As she listened, she stood erect, facing Levanter, who had sat down on her bed. (BD, 9-10)

The dynamic of this scene is most curious. Levanter is aware that he should not be sexually attracted to his own mother and should immediately withdraw to his own

[6]This scene is oddly reminiscent of the moment in the train derailment episode, in *The Painted Bird*, when the boy and the Silent One realize that their attempt to kill the brutal farmer has gone askew. They have killed dozens of innocent people, yet the farmer remains unpunished.

bedroom, but he is paralyzed with fear that his mother will notice his arousal. Levanter is uncertain how to proceed.

> He did not move. Attempting to appear at ease, he reclined a bit, only to feel her thighs against his back. Without a word his mother reached for him, and without a word he responded. (BD, 10)

Levanter's encounter with his mother has a peculiar childlike quality. Devoid of romance or eroticism and governed by so many of his mother's codicils, Levanter remains more a son than a lover. Prohibited from kissing or fingering or engaging in oral sex, it seems apparent that Levanter's mother is still acting on the basis of maternal love, albeit taken to absurd lengths. She is interested in providing a forum to enhance Levanter's sexual dexterity. Thus their relationship is not an end in itself, but rather a means of expanding Levanter's range of experience. Though lacking in passion, this blind date is important because Levanter learns an unswerving devotion to his mother and spends the rest of his life trying to recapture this relationship, in one form or another.[7]

Pauline, who appears in the opening and closing pages of the novel, is a concert pianist like Levanter's mother, while Mary-Jane Kirkland, Levanter's wife, is an oddly maternal figure, a number of years older than Levanter. Levanter's first contact with her arrives in the mail, after she writes him a letter praising his article in *Investor's Quarterly*. After arranging to have dinner with Mary-Jane, Levanter initially mistakes her for her secretary. Mary-Jane does not bother correcting him: throughout their evening together, Levanter remains unaware of Mary-Jane's identity. When he learns the truth, he is embarrassed and then amused. Since they are from such different worlds, in every sense, they enjoy

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[7]Kosinski's adoration of his own mother is well known and *Blind Date* is a sort of homage to her. James Park Sloan recounts a conversation between Kosinski and a friend in which "Kosinski unburdened himself of the revelation that he would like to have sex with his own mother." (Sloan 1996, 149) Though he ultimately did not have such a relationship (thus his statement is an unrealized regret), it is significant that his most fervent wish was that he would have been able to bring her sexual pleasure. (Sloan 1996, 149)

sharing their lives together. After a short courtship, Mary-Jane suggests they get married. Again, through a twist of fate what began as a fan letter has ended in a marriage.

During their time together, Mary-Jane derives great joy from providing Levanter with a diverse range of experience. Her reaction to learning of her inoperable brain tumor is instructive.

> She was aware of her disease and of the prognosis. She cried only once—when she told Levanter that her illness had cut off what she saw as her mission: to expand his freedom, to offer him a life he might have lived had he inherited such great wealth himself. She said she wanted him to enjoy her money without the sense of entrapment and guilt affluence usually brings to its heirs, and to pursue whatever interested him most in life. (BD, 256)

Mary-Jane is exactly the sort of replacement mother-figure he has been seeking, yet as with his actual mother, he can only stand by and watch Mary-Jane's demise. He cannot slow the progression of her illness. This scene repeats itself throughout the novel, as Levanter loses first his mother, then his friend Jacques Monod and finally Mary-Jane, to severe illnesses. Each of the most influential nurturers in his life (inclusive of his old friend Woytek) die before their time. Mary-Jane's brain tumor quickly transforms her from a vibrant woman into a near-vegetative state. Each loss that Levanter suffers, each blind date with destiny, transforms his life. It is significant that after her death, Levanter moves back into his old apartment. It is almost like he was never married at all, since he now resumes the existence that he had prior to the arrival of Mary-Jane's note. Levanter is left alone to ponder what might have been.

Levanter displays stoicism, continuing on in the face of tragedy. Each misfortune forces Levanter to know himself better. Ironically as it turns out, Mary-Jane provides Levanter

with one last expansion of perception through the trauma of having to watch her slowly perish in front of his eyes. Unfortunately for Levanter, Mary-Jane's first husband, William Tenet Kirkland—in his will—has precluded her from making any bequests. Upon her death, all of Mary-Jane's property simply reverts back to the estate of her husband. In this way, it is clear that Levanter's actions are unconnected to any ulterior motives. Though she is not conscious of his ministrations, Levanter displays great tenderness towards his wife, in her last days. As her cancer progresses, he achieves a kind of emotional purity, eventually coming to think of her as his infant daughter. (BD, 257) In this moment of selflessness, he transcends himself, growing—emotionally at least—beyond all the previous Kosinskian protagonists.

The death of Levanter's wife is reminiscent of two other episodes in *Blind Date*. In the first, Levanter is reunited with his mother, only days before her death from cancer. It has been twenty years since he has last seen her and despite being a young and dynamic mother when the reader first sees her, her prolonged illness has taken a terrible toll. Her hair has fallen out and she has lost a large amount of weight from her chemotherapy. Nevertheless, she is not ashamed of her appearance, perhaps because she feels certain that Levanter will remember her as healthy and beautiful. As he strokes her breasts for the last time, his mother's eyes glaze over and she appears to be time-tripping to some other, more satisfying period in her life, perhaps back to her original sexual encounter with Levanter, so many years before.

The other scene which is evocative of Mary-Jane's decline and death occurs when Levanter must face his own demise on a ski slope. Though the reader might expect him to be resentful, he remains at peace with himself. He meets his own death in much the same fashion with which he approaches Mary-Jane's. As he fades into unconsciousness for the last time, he seems uncommonly content. His last thoughts are of a beach where he is

telling a child a story. Levanter is aware that life is made up of such blind dates and that they cut both ways. These encounters with chance may just as easily lead to true love as to the moment of his death. This duality is built into every blind date, as when Romarkin learns that Levanter's new neighbor at Princeton is Svetlana Alliluyeva.

> "It can't be," he whispered. "The daughter of Stalin an American. It can't be." He shook his head. "If within a quarter of a century you or I can go through life under Stalin and then go halfway around the world and meet his daughter as an ordinary next door neighbor, well, I guess that means anything can happen." (BD, 89)

It appears that despite himself, Romarkin has moved over to Monod's viewpoint. He is beginning to realize that the imposition of an orderly and logical plot upon situations in which none exists is inherently dangerous. Prior to this moment, Romarkin seemed to be of the opinion that each moment was part of some larger design. For example, after he is reunited with Levanter on the street in Paris, he asks whether people in the West are really 'better' than the citizens of their homeland. Embedded in Levanter's reply is confirmation that he sees his life as a prolonged sequence of blind dates.

> "I have found people to be good everywhere," Levanter answered. "They turn bad only when they fall for little bits of power tossed to them by the state or by a political party, by a union or a company, or a wealthy mate. They forget that their power is nothing more than a temporary camouflage of mortality." (BD, 94)

Once a person has convinced himself that there is a destiny guiding his life, he really forfeits any conception of free will. Like the protagonist of a story or novel, he has no choice but to do what the author of the story decrees. Everything which happens to him is assumed to have been part of a larger purpose and fit into the plot of his life. At this point, his existence stops being his own. Having rejected any notion of objective destiny,

Kosinski's novel strives to avoid distorting existence by forcing the "spontaneous nature of human existence into an artificial straitjacket." (Sherwin 1981, 48) As in life, things simply happen to Levanter, often for no apparent reason. The importance of any specific moment is not revealed to him until after it occurs—and sometimes not even then. One day, for example, he decides to visit a New York publishing house. While there, he encounters Charles Lindbergh. Because of the aviator's well-known dalliance with National Socialism, Levanter finds himself, at least at first, somewhat leery of Lindbergh.

Like any survivor, Levanter initially approaches Lindbergh with a number of preconceived notions about his politics. Contrary to what he may have believed, however, Levanter sees that Lindbergh is neither ignorant nor bigoted. Perhaps despite himself, Levanter spends time with Lindbergh and finds him to be amiable and cultured, a man much like himself. Kosinski crafts this episode very carefully; nothing especially significant or shocking happens while they are together. Even when a woman approaches them on the street, it is not Lindbergh she thinks she recognizes, but Levanter—from a recent television appearance. Throughout this episode, the two characters simply interact, as two new acquaintances might.

When Levanter inevitably raises the question of Lindbergh's involvement with the America First movement (which delayed America's entry into the war) and his 'positive' interest in Hitler's Germany, Lindbergh's answer is pathetically inadequate. It becomes apparent that he was impressed by the Nazis' reorganization of the German economy and felt that their racial policies were merely an unpleasant stage they had to work through.

> "Mass atrocities, he said, like acts of individual heroism,
> often appear unthinkable before they occur. (BD, 102)

What becomes clear is Lindbergh's incredible naïveté. By failing to peer just beneath the surface of German society, he somehow convinced himself that fascism was a miracle and not a nightmare. In the end, Lindbergh's status as an American icon would be forever tarnished by his decision to support the appeasement of one of the most ruthless tyrants of the twentieth century. With Levanter, Lindbergh attempts to portray his own support for Hitler as an oversight, not unlike misreading a "plane's control panel." (BD, 102) Levanter, however, knows better. Lindbergh's excuse—that he was asleep at the wheel with regard to what was going on in Germany—is not quite the same as a true blind date with destiny, a truly random event. Instead, the Lindbergh episode relates to another aspect of the blind date motif which is not connected with role of chance: namely that looking solely at the surface of an object precludes the possibility of objectively analyzing its merits. Levanter's wish is to probe beneath the surface of things, to better understand what is going on around him. He knows only too well that the surface of either an object or a person, more often than not, disguises what lies beneath. On a practical level, this concerns the eternal mystery of human identity. The physical embodiment of this mystery is the Foxy Lady character whom Levanter initially encounters in the no-man's land between Switzerland and France. Foxy Lady, a transsexual so exquisitely beautiful and graceful that Levanter does not immediately discern that she was once a man, is among the most fascinating of all of Kosinski's characters.

During his time with her, Levanter realizes that there is something different about Foxy Lady, but he is unable to immediately determine the source of his anxiety. By all appearances she is a highly desirable woman, an unusually attentive lover and an expansive personality who attracts others to her wherever she travels. Despite his attraction to her, Levanter is disturbed by her presence and suspects that she may be hiding something. One day he follows her to a club where there are other transsexuals.

Unable to contain her secret any longer, Foxy Lady tells Levanter her story. For many years she had felt trapped in a man's body. Prior to encountering Levanter, she had taken the final step of having her organ surgically removed. Unfortunately, Foxy Lady's wealthy family had reacted badly to her operation, disinheriting her and having her passport revoked. Now she wanders, penniless and country-less. By her own admission, she has "made the worst sacrifice a man can make." (BD, 174) In the so-called Menopause Room in the club, Foxy Lady shows Levanter what awaits her as she ages. The occupants of the room, mostly drunk or stoned, are transsexuals whose bodies have deteriorated horribly with age. Despite the surgeries and hormonal injections, they have once again begun to look male. In this dreadful room, Levanter realizes the sad fate which eventually awaits each "man-made woman," including his friend. (Harpham 1981, 156) Foxy Lady obviously fears this grim fate, but at the same time, she knows that this room (or one like it), is where she will eventually end up. Foxy Lady pleads with Levanter to stay with her, to perhaps save her from this fate, but Levanter declines.

> "I was hooked on the mystery of you," he said. "And now it has been solved." (BD, 168)

According to Byron L. Sherwin, characters such as Foxy Lady are one of "Kosinski's ways of expressing the view that the other is never truly known, no matter how intimate the relationship." (Sherwin: 28) Foxy Lady is a concrete reminder that nothing is as it first appears. Despite being a shrewd and sophisticated character, Levanter is unable to detect Foxy Lady's origin, nor even that she is a virgin—at least with regard to her new body. He has been fooled utterly. Once again, something entirely unlikely has taken place and Levanter does not realize its significance until after it is over. Elizabeth Stone, in her 1977 *Psychology Today* article, poses the question that Kosinski seems to be asking in *Blind Date*:

> ...in our daily, upwardly mobile lives, how long have we known the person we've known the longest, and how much of the rest of the world does he or she share?
> (Stone 1977, 60)

This becomes a central question in Levanter's next relationship, with Serena, an abstruse and enigmatic young woman whom he encounters in a store. While Levanter is initially attracted by her resemblance to Nameless, what seems to captivate him most are her cryptic responses to queries about her life. She is determined not to give up any information, so her life becomes a riddle to be solved. But no matter how he coaxes her, Levanter fails to entice Serena into surrendering even the most trifling details of her personal biography. Thus she is a hybrid of two of Kosinski's previous protagonists: Chance, since she is entirely unencumbered by the burden of a personal history and Tarden, in terms of her unwillingness—or perhaps inability—to disclose who she is. Clearly, she wishes to maintain control over the evolution of their relationship, and without so much as a telephone number to contact her, Levanter has little choice but to allow Serena to come and go as she pleases. It is unclear when, and if, she ever tells Levanter the truth about anything, including her name. Indeed, after searching her personal possessions, Levanter fails to find a driver's license or even an envelope to confirm her identity.

Though Levanter knows nothing whatever about Serena, she herself takes an immediate interest in his life, always striving to learn more.

> Each time, like a curious child, she would flip through the business letters on his desk, take a look at the pile of books on his bed table, turn the tape recorder on and off, examine the photographs of him skiing that hung on the walls. She'd go toward the bathroom, Levanter close behind, and turn on the tub for a bubble bath. Then she would study herself in the mirror and check his medicine cabinet, picking up some

> of the vials and reading aloud the names of the drugs and the doctors who had prescribed them. (BD, 213)

She seems to be searching for the metaphorical key which will unlock Levanter's identity. Ironically, he is not really trying to hide himself from her, but Serena is motivated by a cynicism about other people: she presumes that they are as circumspect about their lives as she is about hers. As the relationship evolves, Levanter opens himself up completely to Serena, taking her to parties and introducing her to his friends and allowing her to drop by on short notice. She has joined his circle, yet he still knows nothing about her. Levanter comes to accept this situation, explaining at one point that he feels emancipated by Serena precisely because she is a stranger. With friends, he is bound to behave as they have come to expect, but not with Serena. (BD, 215) Life is never routine with her around. Instead, she sets out to make every aspect of their relationship, including their lovemaking, fresh and unpredictable. (BD, 216) In the end, though, while it is true that she has gotten to know Levanter, that they have shared some level of intimacy, she has never surrendered anything of herself. Thus she remains a stranger.

This all changes one night when Levanter picks Serena up at the airport. While returning home, it becomes apparent that something is dreadfully wrong with their limousine driver. The man is nearly catatonic and manifests erratic behaviour, not responding to queries, sweating profusely, nearly smashing into other cars and accelerating wildly. Just as Levanter seems to be calming him down, however, Serena loses patience and kills the distraught man by stabbing him repeatedly with a metal comb. When Levanter suggests that they must now call the police, she grows greatly disconcerted. Left with no recourse, she announces to Levanter the source of her misgivings: she is a prostitute and because of her prior convictions for soliciting, she is concerned that the authorities will rush to

judgment, disbelieving the story of what actually transpired in the car in favour of simply charging them both with murder.

> "You've introduced me to some of your friends," she continued. "Would the police, or a jury, believe that you don't even know my name, where I live and with whom, and how I make my living?" (BD, 227)

Covered in the driver's blood, Levanter concludes that Serena is probably correct: the truth is simply too implausible. He feels that he must dispose of the body and the car. This is a particularly significant blind date for a number of reasons. First, Levanter does not anticipate the limo ride turning dangerous. Second, he is stunned that Serena is capable of such a violent act. Third, this incident makes it impossible for Serena to continue hiding her true identity. Fourth, this revelation leads directly to the destruction of their relationship.

The blind date with the limousine driver has a profound impact on Levanter's life, not so much for its own sake, but because it acts as a kind of wake up call. Because she was young and beautiful, he had come to view Serena's discretion as charming and mysterious. He forgot that the things people attempt to keep from each other are often exceedingly disturbing. Even after spending long stretches of time with Serena, Levanter could not guess the nature of the secret she worked so hard to keep from him. Like Foxy Lady, her appearance did not betray her real identity. After the revelation of how she earns a living, their relationship shifts in its emphasis. Whereas it was initially Serena who was sufficiently fascinated by Levanter to wish to enter his life, it is now "Levanter's turn to be captivated." (Lilly 1988, 107) He marvels at her capacity to compartmentalize the different worlds through which she moves. Now that Levanter knows her secret, however, she has no further reason to continue hiding. Instead, she shares a series of disturbing stories from her life as a working girl, about murdering an obsessive man who

became too possessive and later seeing a man's eye pop out of his head during the exertion of intercourse. The stories have the effect of making Levanter feel "powerless and defeated." (BD, 235) He knows that the previous dynamic cannot be restored, and that it was a dangerous delusion in any case.

Though he earns his livelihood, at least in part, by reading people's behaviour, he had not the slightest inkling that Serena was a creature of the street. In an odd way, Levanter had overestimated himself. Between the two of them, Serena may actually be the more astute investor. She makes fabulous sums of money, works only when it suits her, lives off the largesse of others, jet-sets into and out of the lives of those she encounters and has a plan by which she hopes to enter the legitimate business world. (BD, 233) Her profession and her life have blended together in a way that even Levanter had not dreamed possible. Because of this incredible amalgamation of life and work, Levanter finds himself unable to separate out Serena the prostitute from Serena the woman. They have become one. The knowledge that she is for sale for the right price prompts Levanter to make an offer: he will open a trust fund to provide for Serena's needs, so long as she spends a number of months with him each year. Serena seems to realize the implications of this offer, that he now sees her as someone he can buy or rent as the spirit moves him. Serena is taken by surprise by the seeming naïvety and tactlessness of Levanter's offer. She makes a joke out of her transformation into an object by first declaring—no doubt accurately—that she is out of Levanter's price range and then giving him some prudent investment advice.

> "Don't invest in your vice," she said, after a moment's reflection. "It's a losing business. Of course, if you marry really rich, maybe then you can afford to own me."
> (BD, 235-236)

Serena's wisecrack is an ironic echo of Levanter's original jest upon encountering her in the bookstore.

> "I want you, but I don't know why. I am sorry you are not for sale in this shop. I'm trying to find out the source of my need." (BD, 211)

After making his offer to purchase her companionship, Serena walks out of his life and is not heard from again. The change in Levanter's perception of Serena has doomed their relationship. This episode is similar to Levanter's rape of Nameless, except it functions in reverse: once Nameless realizes the level of brutality and cruelty of which Levanter is capable, she discontinues their relationship. Conversely, when Levanter did not know the details of Serena's life and was forced to fill in the gaps in his knowledge with his own personality and suppositions, things functioned satisfactorily. Embedded in his newfound knowledge of Serena, however, is a recognition of his own ignorance: he knows next to nothing about Serena. The fact that she is a prostitute, something Levanter only learns by accident, inexorably leads to the termination of their relationship. Everything that he subsequently learns about her, that she once murdered a client, that she expects him to cover up the driver's murder, that she did not particularly care about having possibly exposed him to a venereal disease, only crystallizes his feeling that he does not know her. Levanter's conclusion is that Serena is unusual: while a prostitute is customarily a "stranger pretending to be a lover, Serena is "a lover pretending to be a stranger." (BD, 229) Once he begins to deconstruct her 'stranger' disguise and uncover the core of who she really is, their relationship is finished. What can possibly be learned from studying only the surface of an object?

Too often surfaces obscure, rather than reveal, what lies beneath them. Levanter finds that this is literally true while in the company of another prostitute, earlier in the novel. In her hotel room, Levanter notices that the lighting is atypical and that she seems oddly distracted.

> As his hands stroked her thighs, Levanter saw her eyes in the mirror. Her gaze seemed to be directed beyond the reflection in the mirror; he began to wonder whether she was performing for the benefit of someone else, whether he and the woman were being watched from the other side of the mirror. (BD, 146)

Without warning, Levanter pretends to fling an ashtray at the mirror. At that moment, he hears movement from next door. Forcing his way into the room, he finds that a film crew was recording his sexual encounter. This is an enormously peculiar scene, symbolic, insofar as it functions as a warning about the continuing threat that technology poses to the private sphere, shocking, because it is so entirely bizarre and unexpected, and humorous, because the film crew behaves so obstinately, even after they are caught red-handed. This scene is the quintessence of the blind date: improbable, outlandish and so irregular as to border on the surreal. Banal details do not much interest Levanter: what fascinates him are those phenomena which exist just out of his range of perception. In much the same way as he needed to know what lurked behind Serena's cool exterior, so he also has a natural curiosity about who might be furtively observing him from the other side of each of life's two-way mirrors. Just as Serena was pretending to be something she was not, so the second prostitute is also pretending: she is an actress playing the role of a call girl. In *Blind Date*, life does not imitate art so much as it mimics gonzo pornography.

When the film crew refuses to surrender their footage to Levanter, the scene takes another unexpected turn, with Levanter pulling a special business card out of his wallet. As a paid member of a survey institute called the American Council for Global Security, Levanter is able to confuse the pornographers into believing that he is involved with security and intelligence gathering. Since most people have no knowledge about such matters, Levanter is able to force the crew to accede to his wishes.

> "I'm here on assignment," said Levanter, putting the card back into his wallet. "And there are others like me in the hotel at this moment. Now," he said in the most officious tone he could muster, "you have a choice: either you expose the film or we expose you." (BD, 147)

Another shocking and unlikely scenario has played itself out and Levanter has somehow emerged unscathed. And even more impressive than extricating himself from this difficult situation using a laminated piece of cardboard, is his ability to recognize, by merely studying an unfamiliar prostitute's behaviour, that he was being surreptitiously scrutinized in the first place. As he is leaving the hotel room, one of the film crew jokingly asks Levanter a provocative question. "Why didn't you wait a bit longer and enjoy yourself with the chick?...How often do you get to play in a porno flick?" (BD, 147) This scene is among the most ironic in *Blind Date*. In the course of this strange episode, Levanter is very nearly converted into the subject of what future viewers of his porno movie would believe was a staged scene. And although the sexual intercourse would be real, others would perceive the situation as just more fictional friction. The film crew seems to appreciate the perverse humour of a man's personal life being converted into adult entertainment. Curiously, so does Levanter. While Tarden would have reacted with murderous fury if he had discovered that someone was invading his privacy, Levanter does not take anything personally. He intimidates the film crew and adopts a new persona every bit as skillfully as Tarden, but his real interest lies in recovering the film. The pervading atmosphere in *Blind Date* is a very different and much lighter one than that to which the reader has grown accustomed in Kosinski's previous fiction. The significance of this lighter ambience will be the subject of the next section.

SECTION IV - A NEW TWIST: THE HUMOUR OF *BLIND DATE*

Blind Date has a different feel than Kosinski's previous work. One of the reasons for this is a stylistic shift in direction: humour and mischief distinguish *Blind Date* from books such as *Steps* and *Cockpit*. This change in emphasis alerts the reader that Levanter is a different sort of protagonist. He is relentlessly moving towards some sort of reintegration with society, though it is by no means clear what form it will take. According to John Leonard of *The New York Times*, *Blind Date* has "more humor than we usually find in a Kosinski novel." (Leonard 1977, 33) Moreover, it is the manner in which Kosinski employs this humour which serves to soften the reader's view of his protagonist. In *Blind Date*, Levanter does not seek retribution when someone crosses him. Even when he finds himself the butt of another character's joke, such as the practical joke his future wife, Mary-Jane Kirkland plays on him, he reacts with good humour. He is genuinely mild and patient. For example, when Tarden encounters a boisterous child on an airplane, he threatens to feed the child into the jet's turbines. Levanter, in contrast, seems to enjoy the presence of youngsters. They are not a nuisance to him. At the beginning of *Blind Date*, he invents role-playing games to entertain Pauline's children, and at the conclusion of the novel, his last thoughts are of telling a story to a small boy. The disconnection from others that had previously distinguished the Kosinskian hero has begun to dissipate.

In *Blind Date*, Levanter is not obsessed with matters such as revenge. In fact, he tends not to have obsessions of any kind. There is only one act of Tardenesque retribution in the entire novel: against Captain Barbatov, after he humiliates Levanter in front of the entire army camp. Levanter is a counter-puncher. He never attempts to constrain the autonomy of other characters in the novel. He only acts after others have attempted to harm or debase him. In *The Village Voice*, William Plummer argues that Levanter's character oscillates between that of a "sentimental outlaw" (which will be discussed in the next

section) and that of "one of Ken Kesey's merry pranksters." (Plummer 1977, 78) More often than not, Levanter's conduct ends up being more irritating than truly destructive. For example, from the balcony of his Manhattan apartment, Levanter and Serena enjoy squirting pedestrians with a garden hose. One day they drench a number of celebrities, but they do not otherwise cause any lasting damage. Levanter has participated in such activities before. As a university student, in a flashback sequence, he is shown playing pranks on peasant farmers. While traveling by train, Levanter and his friends take turns making up stories so engrossing that the peasants become distracted and miss their stops. (BD, 215) As Levanter ages, his acts of mischief continue. When a dry-cleaner does not listen to Levanter's instructions and puts too much starch in his shirts, Levanter angers the owner, arguing that the man's rude and generally careless comportment is entirely contrary to how a "true Chinese" should behave. (BD, 143) The owner becomes enraged:

> "I can forget America," he said. "I can forget English. I can forget you and your shirts. But you—you—" He seemed to be planning a decisive verbal attack. "You," he repeated slowly, pointing at Levanter, "you cannot forget what you do not know." As if proud of his logic, he laughed hysterically. "You cannot forget China because you have never been there," he repeated. "The Chinese people are very proud. They would never let your kind in," he declared triumphantly. He leaned against the counter. "Now go out of my Chinese store." (BD, 144)

Levanter's statement, a racial stereotype of the first order, at first, seems most unlike him, but as the scene unfolds, it becomes clear that he was setting up the proprietor. As if on cue, Levanter produces a photograph of himself with a number of Chinese party officials taken in front of the Great Hall of the People. The unfortunate Asian man has taken Levanter's bait and been humiliated in the process. The episode ends with the owner tearing up the picture and sobbing as Levanter picks up his dry-cleaning and walks out of the store. Levanter's ability to anticipate the other man's behaviour and to use this knowledge to humble him, is reminiscent of Tarden in *Cockpit*. Still, it is important that

the reader not lose sight of what has transpired: for the Kosinskian man, this is very nearly a show of mercy. Had Tarden found himself in a similar situation, he would have injured, crippled, killed or publicly humiliated the man. Levanter, however, is content to simply discredit him, to show him to be profoundly wrong about a factual matter. In confrontations with others, Levanter enjoys emerging victorious, but he does not luxuriate in it, like Tarden. He recognizes that there is nothing to be gained by terrorizing everyone who crosses him.

Blind Date differs from Kosinski's previous novels in its recurrent use of humour. Some of the scenes are so superbly crafted that they are reminiscent of *Being There*, arguably Kosinski's funniest book. While *Being There* is a satire of the American political and social elite, the humour of *Blind Date* is different. Clearly Kosinski is trying to do something original in *Blind Date*. There is an enormous range of different kinds of humour scattered throughout the novel, from black comedy to slapstick. At the beginning of the novel, for example, Levanter pretends to mistake a little girl for a boy. Though the child loudly remonstrates that she is, in fact, a girl, Levanter pretends not to hear her. "You're a boy. Don't be ashamed—you're Oliver, a handsome boy." (BD, 3) When an older man walks by, the child decides to continue the game. Echoing Levanter's own words, she insists on addressing the man as though he is a woman.

> "You're not Mister. You're Madame," she said. "Even if you think you're a man, you're really a woman. Ask anyone, ask this gentleman," she urged, pointing to Levanter. (BD, 4)

Levanter's joke has boomeranged back on him, embarrassing the older man. The little girl's precocious enthusiasm for Levanter's joke, especially her decision to imitate Levanter's firm refusal to acknowledge her gender, is presented as a distraction, a bit of harmless fun. A few pages on, however, the humour is of the much darker variety. Levanter has

appropriated a piece of mail, concerning a delicate business contract, addressed to the CEO of a large, publicly owned corporation. The distinguished head of the company, Mr. Weston, invites Levanter to his home to discuss how Levanter acquired the information: he hopes to persuade Levanter to expose the unscrupulous employee who was the source of the leaked material. After agreeing to a generous settlement, Levanter reveals that the mail was actually stolen from Weston's porch. As the head of a large company, Weston's security is exposed as being woefully inadequate. After his initial indignation, Weston cuts Levanter a cheque for twice the agreed upon amount. When Levanter asks the source of Weston's generosity, his answer is darkly comical:

> "You could get twice as much from any of our competitors," said Weston. "Besides, you've just given Pacific and Central an idea. These days new ideas are tough to come by." (BD, 20)

This episode is ominous in a manner that recalls some of Tarden's more creative pranks. Levanter's intrusion into Weston's life, which might well have gotten him arrested, is instead lavishly rewarded. Realizing how much damage Levanter might have done with just one stolen letter, Weston cogitates upon the advantages of filching his competitor's correspondence. Since this episode comes early on, the reader is left to ponder what sort of man Levanter will turn out to be. To some degree, he is an easygoing version of Tarden, but as *Blind Date* unfolds, he demonstrates that he is capable of being his own man. He enjoys jokes of all types, even if they are sometimes at his expense. According to Barbara J. Tepa, in *The Polish Review*, *Blind Date* is distinguished by its superb moments of humour. (Tepa 1978, 108) For example, while Levanter and Romarkin are visiting a Paris club, a prostitute approaches them, inquiring what language they have been speaking. Rather than tell her that it was Russian, Levanter tells the woman that "it's Eskimo." (BD, 95) The woman is incredulous. She argues that he does not look like an Eskimo, a

race that she characterizes as resembling "frozen Chinese." (BD, 95) Levanter reacts with indignation:

> "Mademoiselle," Levanter said harshly, "we Eskimos are a proud race, and we are no more 'frozen Chinese' that the French are 'marinated Italians' or the Swedes 'mummified Germans.'" (BD, 95)

Levanter claims that he and Romarkin are envoys of the Eskimo people, attempting to secure French support for self-government. When the proprietor learns of the presence of two such special representatives in his establishment, he insists they stand up and say a few words to the other guests. At this point, Romarkin rises and begins swearing in Russian. Two Russian émigrés who happen to be at the bar take great offense and assume that Romarkin is a Soviet agent, assigned to harass them. A barroom brawl ensues, after which the proprietor explains to the police that "Eskimos, like the French, were often known to clash over their political views." (BD, 97) These sorts of humorous exchanges are scattered throughout *Blind Date*. Clearly, Kosinski's 1977 novel has a very different ambience than his previous novel, *Cockpit*. When there are scenes of violence and tragedy in *Blind Date*, they have a different, often more ironic meaning, than similar scenes in *Cockpit*. For example, while attending a wedding reception, Levanter sees another guest injured by an antique cannon, fired in celebration. When the father of the groom, an Eastern European poet, calls the authorities to report the accident, the police operator is skeptical. The whole conversation is a blind date in miniature: prior to receiving the emergency call, the operator cannot conceive that individual citizens, much less poets, own cannons, and, in any case, that a person might be accidentally injured by one during—of all things—a wedding.

In the aforementioned scene, Levanter is shown as attempting to assess the victim's wounds, as well as trying to calm his friend, who owns the cannon. When Tarden is

confronted with a similar situation, when he witnesses a woman falling in front of a taxi, for example, he takes out his camera and begins photographing the aftermath of the accident, rather than attempting to help the victim. Tarden does not much seem to care about other people (no doubt because he is a secret agent and perceives others as a threat), whereas Levanter seems atypically sensitive, at least compared to the other Kosinskian men. Somehow he seems not to derive the same kind of enjoyment from the misfortunes of others. When Levanter pays a visit to one of his old professors, newly arrived in America, he finds that the man has inadvertently been consuming canned dog food. Believing that Americans must also use the 'Smiling Dog' brand beef, which he enjoyed so much in Eastern Europe, he has prepared an entire meal out of dog food. Rather than risk embarrassing the man, however, Levanter dutifully consumes a small amount of the main course. To be sure, Levanter can be an exceptionally good sport. He is concerned with how he impacts the lives of other people. In addition, he worries about and tries to correct injustices where he sees them. This is a vital part of his own reintegration into society, as will be seen later in this chapter.

The Kosinskian man's reintegration is best understood in relative terms. All of Kosinski's protagonists are chauvinists, to some extent, but what defines them is how far they carry this chauvinism. Levanter and Romarkin's treatment of the woman they nickname Chairman Mao's Robot (the ultimate proof of her objectification) is a case in point. It differs in a number of ways from Tarden's approach. Levanter's way of looking at the world is less confrontational and antagonistic than Tarden's. Years before they leave the Soviet Union, when Romarkin and Levanter are in charge of hospitality for the International Youth for Peace Festival, Romarkin lures a beautiful, young Asian woman away from her delegation, at least in part to impress his friend, Levanter. Because the delegates are expected and encouraged to mix with people from other countries, the Robot willingly climbs into a car with Levanter and Romarkin and heads back to their hotel. This

escapade, at least on a first reading, is similar to activities in which Tarden might have participated. Yet the episode, read in context, has a different function. It is a clinic in how black humour is supposed to function. Disturbing and droll, the incident with the Robot is condescending to both women and Asians. This scene functions as a parody as the two alpha males take turns dominating, objectifying and humiliating the Robot, who just happens to secretly enjoy such rough treatment.

It is impossible to say what might have happened if the Robot had not wished to stay with the two men, but it does not appear as though Levanter would have harmed her. According to Romarkin, the Robot did not resist "because, like the rest of her comrades, she had never been taught to reason independently." (BD, 46) The Robot never questions authority, but rather defers to it. For several days the Robot stays in the hospitality suite while Romarkin and Levanter take turns having sex with her. This scene is reminiscent of *Cockpit*, but, in fact, it differs quite substantially in tone. Whereas Tarden subjects others to any number of indignities, *Blind Date* (with the notable exception of the episode with Nameless) is different. The Robot is not held against her will. She is not assaulted, nor threatened with physical injury or disfigurement. She is not forced to do anything. She chooses to stay, perhaps because she has ceased to view herself as an individual, apart from the collective. (Cahill [1] 1978, 137-138) When it is time for the Robot to rejoin her comrades, she cries and clings to Levanter and Romarkin. Though she cannot speak Russian, it is as though she is acknowledging that she will miss the two men. Compared with Veronika's gang rape in *Cockpit*, the episode with the Robot is considerably more gentle. It is these sorts of experiences, which are disturbing without being outright horrifying, that most clearly distinguish Levanter from Tarden.

For example, Levanter travels to a small Midwestern town for the sole purpose of seeing how the people of the community deal with a large influx of midgets, who are visiting the

town for a convention of small Americans. On another occasion, Levanter badgers a beautiful, but standoffish woman he meets on a clothing optional beach by commenting on the uncommon beauty of her nose. (BD, 190) He ignores the magnificence of her body in order to deliberately anger her. These sorts of pranks are typical of this more relaxed Kosinskian protagonist. He is still subtly testing the other characters to find their limits, but not in the same sadistic manner as Tarden. Levanter is more sedate and less judgmental than the previous Kosinskian men. For example, Levanter becomes briefly obsessed with a deformed woman he sees in a pharmacy. It is impossible to imagine Tarden having any feelings at all, save disgust, towards a physically challenged person. In *Cockpit*, deformity is invariably treated as something of a horror. Levanter is a different sort of man. He makes it his business to find out more about this unusual woman, who exists as an adult sized head perched on a withered, infant-like body. Levanter arranges to be in attendance at a party to which he knows she has been invited. He speaks to her and soon finds that she has had an unbelievably full life. University educated, she speaks four languages and is amazingly independent and adventuresome, even hitchhiking across Europe by herself. When Levanter asks if she worries that any of her rides will harm her, she is taken aback.

> She looked at him. "Hurt me?" she seemed surprised. "Most of the people I meet are protective of me. They are even reluctant to let me go, afraid that people they pass me to won't take care of me as well as they have." (BD, 219)

Levanter is enormously impressed with her accomplishments. In only twenty-six years, she has an enormous range of experience. Levanter finds himself mysteriously attracted to the woman. He admires the way in which she makes the best of her situation. After learning that she is an art history student, Levanter inquiries into her area of interest. Her answer is witty and self-deprecating.

> "The role of the human head in Christian art." She smiled thoughtfully. "As you can see, I have a vested interest in my studies." (BD, 218)

Levanter finds himself fascinated by how this woman's view of life must necessarily differ from those around her. The scene ends with the woman spurning Levanter's advances, since she is already deeply in love with her boyfriend. At the beginning of the scene, the reader might have expected that she would be attracted to Levanter, but the opposite has actually turned out to be the case. This is another sort of blind date. The woman turns out to be much more than a head. She is a fully functioning adult, who does not wish to be the subject of pity. Her rejection of Levanter suggests that she has found the sort of love for which Levanter is still searching in vain. The joke here is really at Levanter's expense, but he accepts it in stride. It is doubtful that Tarden, were he in Levanter's place, would have admitted defeat so graciously.

In comparison with previous protagonists, Levanter is better equipped to endure life's inevitable disappointments and especially to laugh at himself. In *Blind Date*, when Levanter first meets Mary-Jane Kirkland, he wrongly assumes, because of her relative youth, that she could not possibly be William Kirkland's widow. Mary-Jane does not disabuse him of this notion and instead has fun with it. She introduces herself as Miss Saxon (her maiden name) and says, "I'm with Mrs. Kirkland." (BD, 239) She also encourages Levanter's misperception about Mrs. Kirkland's age by stating that "Mrs. Kirkland is not sufficiently conscious of how old she is." (BD, 240) Only after embarrassing himself at Mary-Jane's dinner party does Levanter learn her true identity. Mary-Jane playfully argues that she has not really deceived Levanter, only encouraged his initial assumptions and stretched the truth a little. "When I said I was with Mrs. Kirkland, I merely added the 'with,'" she whispered. (BD, 249) Mary-Jane has created a great deal of mischief by simply adding one word to her description of herself. The

manipulation of words in this episode of *Blind Date* is an early forerunner to a technique that Kosinski employs on nearly every page of *The Hermit of 69th Street* (1988). Mary-Jane's word play challenges Levanter. In the end, he takes the prank in stride, recognizing that Mary-Jane almost certainly does not participate in practical jokes very often. By having some fun at Levanter's expense, she shows that she is interested in knowing him better.

Throughout *Blind Date*, Levanter is portrayed as being able to take a joke. This capacity distinguishes him from the other protagonists. This is fortuitous because Mary-Jane's lifestyle keeps Levanter perpetually off balance and feeling out of place. In a particularly humbling scene, just as Levanter is finally beginning to feel confident living in Mary-Jane's palatial townhouse, one of his razor blades falls under a sink. Squeezing his naked body under the sink to retrieve the razor, Levanter becomes wedged. After screaming for help, Mary-Jane's maid comes into the bathroom. She withdraws without liberating Levanter, assuming that he wishes to be left undisturbed. Levanter has to wait until Mary-Jane returns home in order to be rescued from his imprisonment. This incident is their marriage in microcosm: whether she intends to or not, Mary-Jane's wealth gives her enormous power over their relationship. With her, Levanter will always be just the consort of one of America's wealthiest widows; he will never be recognized as a person in his own right. Unlike the protagonists of *Steps* or *Cockpit*, Levanter does not seek to hide his insecurities from others. He seems to have little interest in 'spin' and even less compunction about disclosing to Mary-Jane his most humiliating experiences. For example, on their first 'blind date,' Levanter talks of his encounter with a Russian actress and his inability to utilize his fluency in Russian to try to seduce her. He also tells Mary-Jane how he once unknowingly entered one of the most expensive restaurants in New York and ended up spending a sum of money roughly equal to his monthly living expenses.

Levanter is reconciled to his life in a way which would probably be unfamiliar to Kosinski's other protagonists. When something unexpected occurs—when Levanter is confronted with another of life's blind dates—he remains as calm and reasonable as ever. For example, when a cantankerous room service waiter insists that Levanter consume his breakfast while the man stands around watching him eat, Levanter instinctively obeys, rather than argue.[8] Part of how the humour of *Blind Date* functions has to do with the fact that the protagonist seems to be in on the joke. In contrast, Tarden's first person narrative creates a sense of urgency. In a similar incident, in *Cockpit*, there is only a feeling of foreboding as Tarden's roommate, Robert, begins behaving strangely and subsequently attempts to murder him. The version of the Kosinskian man presented in *Blind Date* is not as willing to fight as his predecessors and is able to openly discuss and accept his personal limitations. There is a reason for this—a moral imperative that Levanter feels about his role in the world—which will be the subject of the next section.

SECTION V - LEVANTER'S MORAL IMPERATIVE I: THE WAR AGAINST INJUSTICE

In *Blind Date*, the traditional characteristics of the Kosinskian man's personality: determination, ruthlessness and ingenuity, are utilized towards a new purpose. For the first time, there are what Raymond Sokolov refers to as "moral twinges" present in the thoughts of the Kosinskian hero. (Sokolov 1977, 122) The aforementioned characteristics, combined with his ability to detach himself from the events around him, make it possible for Levanter to think in terms of trying to strike back against injustice. He wishes to change the world around him. Personal revenge is no longer the Kosinskian man's prime motivation. (Lavers 1998, 256) In Kosinski's previous fiction, his protagonists have struggled against various oppressive collectivities, from the Nazis, to the Soviets, to the

[8]The reason for the waiter's eccentric behavior is not revealed until the end of the scene, when it is learned that he is only trying to prevent cutlery from being misappropriated by the guests.

consumer culture of the west. More often than not, however, this need to live as an individual, apart from those around him, took the form of an unfocused rage, threatening anyone who happened to cross the Kosinskian man. In *Blind Date*, Levanter is more mature and sophisticated than his predecessors, so it is natural for him to find more constructive outlets for his antipathy towards society. In a revealing interview with *Psychology Today*, Kosinski explains the thought process which governs the actions of his protagonists.

> They are adventurers but also self-appointed reformers of an unjust world: they interfere on behalf of the weak and the fallen and the disfigured. I see this as an important part of the philosophy of the self: you cannot be faithful to your own sense of drama in your life if you disregard the drama in the life of others—those right next to you. (Sheehy 1977, 55)

Levanter places great value on his personal autonomy and wishes to use his good fortune "to help other political victims to free themselves." (Everman 1991, 104) He is able to assert his individuality through the 'good deeds' he does for the oppressed. Unlike Tarden, who kills either at the behest of his superiors in the Service—to avenge real and perceived slights—or to defend his life, Levanter commits murder in an attempt to stop political oppression. For example, when Levanter learns that the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs from the Kingdom of Indostran takes a yearly skiing vacation at the ski resort of ValPina, he immediately begins making plans to assassinate the man. Through his work in Investors International, Levanter knows that thousands of Indostran's intellectuals are being systematically detained, imprisoned, tortured and murdered by PERSAUD, a ruthless branch of the internal security service set up by the Deputy Minister. After meticulous planning, Levanter manages to place an explosive device in the Deputy Minister's cable car as it is about to ascend the mountain. Levanter then remotely detonates the bomb, instantly killing the man and his bodyguards. In this vignette, the

reader is told that no innocent bystanders are killed or wounded by the explosion, nor were the other cable cars disturbed. Levanter's approach to the assassination is surprisingly calm and businesslike. As a small investor, Levanter knows that only hard work and organization will ensure that his plan goes smoothly.

Clearly he views the murder of the founder of PERSAUD as a high priority, his own private attempt to change the world for the better. Men like the Deputy Minister must now be mindful that there is a price to be paid for their reactionary policies. They will have to reconsider the expediency of continuing to support the savage repression of their countrymen. One determined assassin, without any help, has succeeded in permanently removing an influential man from an important position. Unlike the defined line of succession which is so much a part of democratic government, Levanter knows that the police state is a much more vulnerable political apparatus. Knowing about such states firsthand, Levanter is actually able to subvert the established power structure of a small authoritarian state. He has shown that one man really can make a difference. For Levanter, "to act is to assume responsibility, and only the individual can be truly responsible for his actions; an institution cannot." (Everman 1991, 104) Those who run PERSAUD have now been presented with a perfect opportunity to reevaluate the efficacy of their positions.

What interests Levanter is justice, or at least his version of it. The survival of the Total State is predicated upon the belief that no one individual will ever have the courage to stand up to the overwhelming might of the collectivity. In tiny increments and in his own idiosyncratic way, Levanter is challenging this notion, slowly attempting to remake the world around him. In the end, *Blind Date* does not gauge the impact of Levanter's actions on the intellectuals being persecuted by PERSAUD. It is entirely possible that the Deputy Minister's replacement will be an equally amoral man. For Levanter, what

matters is the attempt to help others. He wishes to demonstrate that men of good conscience need not stand about watching the perpetuation of oppressive political structures. Whether he actually effects change is outside the scope of this novel. Clearly, Levanter wishes to redefine the meaning of his own life through his humanitarian works, to show that a small investor's life need not be entirely devoted to profit alone. Levanter reinvests in the idea that against all odds, one man can still make a difference.

In *Psychology Today*, Kosinski ruminates about what he learned from his wartime childhood:

> ....in the midst of my misery, I kept seeing myself as merely one of a majority of people who suffered and were not happy—my oppressors included. Happy men don't waste their time beating and punishing others, I thought, and I kept imagining how unhappy those who caused my pain would be the day they realized how uselessly they lived the only life they had. (Sheehy 1977, 125)

Levanter seems to share a similar motivation; he is determined that his life will not have been lived in vain. After the first portion of his life, under Stalin, and the second part, as an investor in America, Levanter is "preoccupied with counteracting social injustice." (Cahill [1] 1978, 141) The Kosinskian man's modus operandi, violent retribution, remains the same; only his motivation has changed. The violent acts portrayed in *Blind Date*, according to William Plummer in *The Village Voice*, are much less gratuitous. (Plummer 1977, 78) Levanter wants to make the world a safer place. He sometimes employs violence to achieve his ends, but does not always have to resort to it. Some time before the assassination, Levanter is attending a party with several officials of the Indostran government, where he takes a series of photographs of the guests. Several days later, when he shows the contact proofs to one of the officials, the man offers Levanter a large sum of money for the skillfully photographed pictures. Levanter declines payment, then

in jest suggests that the man use his influence with the Indostran government to have PERSAUD release a number of the imprisoned dissidents in exchange for the photos. Incredibly, less than a month afterward, the official fulfills his part of the bargain and the intellectuals are released. Later, Levanter meets one of the men whom he helped to have released.

> The writer said he assumed that his sudden freedom was the result of a long campaign carried out on his behalf by writers and editors from P.E.N., members of the International League for Human Rights, Amnesty International, and other such powerful organizations. (BD, 39)

The dissident becomes distraught when Levanter reveals the actual circumstances of his release; that his emancipation was purchased with a few photographs. The man feels humiliated and impotent. Though Levanter tries to convince him that his writing does matter, the man's confidence is shaken. Since his writings had nothing to do with his release, he begins to doubt that his thoughts ever influenced anyone. Moreover, he is disappointed that none of his countrymen were working to hasten his release. He owes his freedom to the efforts of a creative American businessman. Unlike the dissident, Levanter is a pragmatist. He values content over form. He only wanted to secure the release of an imprisoned writer. How he achieved this end and how the truth would affect the various prisoners does not concern him. To Levanter, justice is an absolute. Either a man is free or he is not. There is nothing in between. Levanter's private war is motivated by his own morality, based on his memories of repression in Eastern Europe. All his good deeds for strangers grow from this overwhelming need to redress injustice, to be accountable to those around him, to try to make the world a better place.

The scene ends on a curious note. After hearing a radio report about the assassination of the Deputy Minister, Levanter is described as "feeling removed from the act, already feeling it was something he had done long ago." (BD, 43) There is only one other occasion in *Blind Date* when Levanter is reported to be feeling this way: just after he murders a New York City hotel clerk who had been working as a spy for the KGB. A short time after the clerk's murder, Levanter's memories of the man's death are described as faded old photos. (BD, 185) This level of detachment is typical of the previous Kosinskian men, but not of Levanter, at least through most of *Blind Date*. The reason he reacts in this way seems related to the nature of how the Deputy Minister and the hotel clerk have chosen to live their lives. While Levanter is involved in an ongoing struggle to successfully reintegrate himself into society, he cannot abide those who are themselves perpetuators of institutionalized injustice. Because they cause suffering and misery, the Deputy Minister and the clerk are themselves living obstacles to the realization of a more equitable society. These men are part of the problem and must be removed. To show them mercy would be tantamount to admitting defeat in his quest to end injustice wherever he sees it. This is a vital part of Levanter's personal code. (Cahill [2] 1978: 35)

Levanter's brutal murder of the desk clerk is much more personal than the assassination of the Deputy Minister. Like some of the previous Kosinskian men, Levanter remains a saboteur, but he has developed another character trait: accountability. (Leonard 1977, 33) In the episode with the desk clerk, Levanter becomes upset when he finds that his old friend, JP, an Olympic fencing champion, is being coerced into spying for the KGB. Despite his patriotic feelings and singular athletic skill, JP's refusal to infiltrate NATO leads to his being viewed (by those who sought to recruit him) as a traitor. Through a friendly diplomat, Levanter learns that the Party is planning to arrest JP upon his return to Moscow. Further, he discovers that the KGB has had JP under continual surveillance. The desk clerk is important in this episode because he assigns the guests to their hotel

rooms, always managing to place visiting Soviets in rooms specially outfitted with surveillance equipment.

The evidence which is collected against JP, including a number of conversations he has with Levanter, throw his patriotism into question. Levanter apprises JP of the danger which may await him, suggesting that defecting to the west is his only hope of saving himself. JP mistakenly believes that his value to the state as an athlete will protect him against any retribution. Upon his return, he is arrested, interrogated, violently assaulted and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison. When Levanter learns of JP's fate, he becomes enraged. He arranges a particularly Tardenesque blind date for the hotel clerk who helped set up JP. After enticing the man to join him at a Turkish bathhouse, Levanter murders the man by vivisecting him with a sabre. Levanter's retribution is both apropos and sufficiently violent that it may serve as an admonition to other would-be spies. The clerk's death is exceedingly brutal, but it somehow leaves the reader oddly satisfied, in a way that much of the violence in *Cockpit* does not. It is hard not to see how the clerk had earned his painful and undignified death. A cathartic role-reversal has occurred, whereby "the oppressor has become the victim." (Lilly 1982, 393)

Fully aware that nothing he does to the desk clerk is likely to have any far-ranging effect on the established system of oppression, Levanter nevertheless needs to hold someone responsible for JP's unfortunate situation. The idea of sitting back and doing nothing is intolerable for this (or indeed any other) Kosinskian protagonist. The ferocious manner with which he dispatches the clerk allows Levanter to feel that he has done something tangible to protest the unfairness of JP's twenty-five year sentence. From a purely political standpoint, the demise of the clerk is pointless. It makes Levanter feel better, but it does not really change anything. In all likelihood, the Soviet authorities will simply hire a new clerk, in another of Manhattan's stylish hotels, in order to keep tabs on their

citizens. Levanter could not possibly be unaware of the slim prospects for success, but he still feels duty-bound to try.

Like each of the Kosinskian men, Levanter's youth was spent watching people doing nothing while others were persecuted. Now, as an adult, he refuses to remain a spectator. Sometimes his plans succeed, as in the vignette where he manages to have a number of PERSAUD prisoners released, but sometimes his plans backfire. For example, after ingratiating himself with the wife of the President of Deltazur (by detecting and alerting her to a potentially embarrassing mistranslation of a line in a speech she is scheduled to deliver to a Press Club luncheon), Levanter tries to orchestrate another transaction similar to the photograph exchange. Since her husband's government is illegally detaining two prominent journalists, Levanter asks that they be released as a show of thanks for his help. The President's wife agrees and the men are set free. Several months later, as he is leaving Investors International headquarters, Levanter is accosted by an irate woman who spits in his face. She turns out to be the sister of the translator who made the original error in the speech. Much to his chagrin, Levanter learns that the translator has been indefinitely detained on charges of sabotage and has been subjected to inhumane forms of torture in order to punish him for his crime against the state. Despite such ironic setbacks, Levanter is not deterred. He simply presses on. His good works are too important to him to be affected by unfortunate mishaps.

Everything in Levanter's background convinces him that he must attempt to fight injustice. Nothing dissuades him from performing these good deeds, which he sees as his life's-work. He cannot help being concerned about others. It is part of who he is. Near the beginning of the novel, on Aval, one of the most challenging runs in the Alps, Levanter comes across a woman having terrible difficulty negotiating the run. Levanter skis over to her and the men in her party and begins taking photographs of the group. Then he

casually inquires about their level of expertise on these sorts of ski runs. Upon learning that the unfortunate woman has only been on skis for two days, Levanter knows that there is a chance that she might be killed in the attempt to finish her run. He immediately takes control of the situation.

> "Now, you all listen," he said. "This young lady will walk all the way down, and you will carry her skis. I'll be around to make sure that nothing happens to her. If she is hurt, I have taken enough photographs to have all three of you arrested and charged by the authorities in ValPina." (BD, 30)

When the men ask why Levanter is intervening on behalf of a stranger, he answers, "Simple humanity will do for the moment." (BD, 30) Later, the woman thanks him for saving her life; ironically, what begins as one of Levanter's most innocuous interventions—in comparison with the assassination of the Deputy Minister—is also his most appreciated. Levanter is defining himself through his random acts of kindness. If Tarden had done something like this, he would undoubtedly have had some sort of ulterior motive, such as meeting and seducing the woman. Levanter is clearly a different sort of Kosinskian man. He is energized by the unselfish act of helping others. He wishes and needs to heal himself. The life is slowly returning to this protagonist as he continues his reintegration into society. This is the second half of Levanter's moral imperative.

SECTION VI - LEVANTER'S MORAL IMPERATIVE II: HEALING AS REINTEGRATION

Up to and including *Blind Date*, the Kosinskian protagonist has carried with him the wounds of his wartime childhood in Eastern Europe. This is an essential part of who the Kosinskian man is, yet Levanter somehow moves past this experience. What distinguishes him from the others is his relative success in developing methods by which

to reenter society. Though he is still very much a work in progress, Levanter has achieved a level of maturation which permits him to partially complete the healing process. For example, he accepts the details of his own mortality and feels no need to battle against any perceptions of vulnerability. He actively searches for relationships in which he can give and receive love. This, in turn, helps him develop a connection to the world. For the first time, it is possible for him to feel happiness and contentment. At the same time, he also seems to understand that he will sometimes need to relinquish control. In *Blind Date*, the Kosinskian man is a more emotionally diverse character, entertaining feelings of remorse for the Russian tourists he deceived into believing he was a KGB agent, and caring deeply for others, including Mary-Jane and Jacques Monod, even after it is clear that their respective illnesses will inevitably kill them. Moreover, his conception of revenge also differs markedly from Tarden's. Levanter operates from the belief that all any man or woman owes him is indifference. When he exacts retribution, it is only against those who have really crossed the line, such as Captain Barbatov.

In *Blind Date*, the Kosinskian hero has begun to grow as a character. For the first time, he has ceased living only for himself. According to Norman Lavers, Levanter is "a softened, more human, more compassionate protagonist, less interested in personal revenge, less interested in controlling other human beings." (Lavers 1982, 130) His concern for people defines him as a protagonist. Though he occasionally engages in the sorts of brutality which came so naturally to Tarden, Levanter is equally capable of feeling regretful over things he has done. For example, he seems to grasp how much damage he did to both his own life and Nameless', through his assault on her. He makes oblique reference to this abortive affair, this love that might have been, with both Serena and Pauline. According to Paul R. Lilly, "Levanter has reached a level of compassion and social concern that Tarden consciously avoided." (Lilly 1988, 101-102) Levanter seems to know that he can reach a state of personal contentment only by caring for others, by trying to bring happiness to

those he encounters. He learns that he must take responsibility for the events of his life. Norman Lavers argues that "had this episode [Nameless' rape] been in *Cockpit*, the novel would simply have gone on to the next episode, with never a glance back." (Lavers 1982, 130) Levanter does not simply move on from this vicious assault; he revisits it again and again throughout the remainder of the novel. Ironically, it is possible that it has a greater impact on Levanter than on Nameless. To be sure, it follows him around in a way which immediately distinguishes Levanter from the usual Kosinskian protagonist.

Just before Nameless learns the truth, that it was Levanter and not Oscar who had sexually assaulted her, Levanter declares that his greatest fear is losing her. (BD, 85) At the end of the novel, with Pauline, Levanter expresses virtually the same idea, but this time with even greater urgency:

> "I want you to fall in love with me," he said, "to want me as I am now. Somehow, I think you're my last chance."
>
> She disengaged herself from his embrace and stepped back.
>
> "Your last chance? For what?"
>
> "To be wanted, rather than remembered. To have a fresh emotion, a sensation that isn't just a ricocheted memory. To be part of that spontaneous magic."
> (BD, 260)

Levanter does not hide his vulnerability. In the interval between Pauline's first appearance in the opening pages and her reappearance in the novel's penultimate episode, it is clear that Levanter's characterization of her as his 'last chance' is correct: he freezes to death in the final scene, so Pauline truly is the last woman who sexually desires Levanter. Ironically, his evening with Pauline very nearly ends before it begins when they find that an inattentive workman has allowed paint to seep into the lock in Levanter's door. Only Pauline's diligence in locating some turpentine in the basement of Levanter's apartment

building allows what is the most important romantic episode in the novel to continue. Byron L. Sherwin argues that "for Kosinski, sex can be a key with which one may unlock the most reliable door to the soul." (Sherwin 1981, 27) Pauline seems to have opened such a door in Levanter's heart. At the same time, she opens herself to Levanter's need. Levanter's interest in Pauline is related, at least in part, to her uncanny similarity to Nameless. Indeed, in this episode, Pauline is very nearly a surrogate for Nameless. As Levanter brings Pauline to orgasm, something which she had never previously achieved on her own, a form of transference occurs. Levanter seems to be attempting to make amends for what happened with Nameless years before. Kosinski's graphic depiction of sadomasochistic intercourse, in which Pauline is completely immobilized and then violently penetrated to induce an intense and cathartic orgasm, is distressing in its similarity to Levanter's original assault on Nameless. The effectiveness of this scene lies in its duality: the rough sex is engaging and sensuous (a fresh development in Kosinski's novels), but Nameless' presence seems to float above and haunt this scene, which is really supposed to be about Pauline's moment of greatest joy. There is verisimilitude in this vignette: as in life, no moment is ever perfect. Embedded in these moments of greatest satisfaction and triumph are memories of previous failures and of lives not lived. Levanter must accept that he can never redress the manner in which he twice tore asunder Nameless' innocence. Pauline truly is a last chance for Levanter. This is why her pleasure is so important to Levanter. As the scene ends, with Pauline having finally been able to take pleasure from her own body, there is a palpable sense of relief. In "the ultimate moment," Kosinski describes Pauline's tension as having instantly dissipated and Levanter himself is said to have lost "the feeling of his own shape." (BD, 263) Both characters are liberated, Pauline, by her climax, and Levanter "from the cage of oppressive memories of his past." (Lilly 1988, 120) This mutual moment of healing is Levanter's finest and 'arguably most selfless' act in *Blind Date*.

The idea explored in the orgasm scene, of subordinating oneself so that another can achieve serenity and joy, is a significant development in Kosinski's work. (Plummer 1977, 79) By placing someone else's pleasure before his own, Levanter achieves a type of fulfillment which eluded the other protagonists. Indeed, despite the fact that he has not received any physical gratification whatsoever, Levanter nevertheless appreciates the significance of what he has done for Pauline. According to Elizabeth Stone, the key to this scene is "Levanter's recognition of the woman's sexual individuality." (Stone 1977, 64) What begins as an episode of bondage and domination is somehow transformed into an emancipating experience for both parties. Levanter's first two sexual experiences: with Nameless and his mother, are devoid of the kind of passion he finds during his night of desire with Pauline. In an interview with Daniel Cahill, Kosinski speaks of Levanter's "unfulfilled longing to be able to examine one single human being, one single truth at a time." (Cahill [1] 1978, 134) With Pauline, this dream is finally complete: Levanter is now wanted. In turn, he displays a tenderness of spirit towards Pauline that was not present in previous protagonists. According to Norman Lavers, "sex, for Levanter is less an act of aggression, so that at least the possibility of love exists for him." (Lavers 1998, 260) With Pauline, it is impossible for him to keep his romantic side submerged. Throughout this novel, the reader has seen the life gradually returning to Levanter, and after his tryst, this version of the Kosinskian man finally seems ready to reengage with the world. His sudden death several pages on is indeed untimely, but somehow the calm demeanor with which he confronts his own demise, precludes the reader from feeling sorry for Levanter. Perhaps this is also due to how little use Levanter would have for such pity: Why in the world would you feel sorry for me, he might ask, if I do not feel sorry for myself?

Levanter's other significant love relationship, with Mary-Jane, permits him "to come into contact with and to explore a dimension of experience—the world of the heart—that he had hitherto neglected." (Bruss 1981, 225) The fact that the Kosinskian protagonist is

prepared to enter into an arrangement of exclusivity is a significant development, unthinkable in the previous novels, and especially surprising insofar as his last two relationships, with Foxy Lady and Serena respectively, did not end particularly well. (Bruss 1981, 223) Mary-Jane's love for Levanter has a tremendous effect on him. Even after learning that her condition is terminal, her main regret is not being able to provide Levanter with the kind of freedom that her enormous wealth (had she been permitted to bequeath large gifts) might have provided him. Levanter is never bitter over his wife being taken from him: he seems to understand and appreciate the nature of Mary-Jane's dedication to him. He takes care of her, even after the progression of the cancer has reduced her to a near-vegetative state. Levanter's tenderness and dutiful attention to his wife, after she becomes bedridden, is an example of how far the Kosinskian man has come. It is impossible to imagine Tarden taking care of another person, even a loved one, for any length of time. It is more likely that he would simply have left Mary-Jane and never returned. Levanter, however, accepts life as it comes: Mary-Jane's demise is just another of the things that happen in the course of a lifetime. When it comes time for his own death, on the slopes at ValPina, Levanter again accedes to the inevitability of a situation which can only result in his death. There are not any histrionics about the unfairness of life. Levanter simply permits himself to drift off to sleep, his life now over.

Levanter's stoicism about his own death grows out of how he has lived his life. Like any man, Levanter may have regrets, but he has been able to learn from each of his mistakes. Moreover, he has tried to embrace Monod's supposition that life is devoid of plot. Levanter realizes that he must "utilize each moment of his life as it passes rather than to dismiss it as a minor incident in a larger 'passage' or zone of time." (Cahill [2] 1978: 35) This helps Levanter find a semblance of inner peace which eluded previous versions of the Kosinskian man. As Levanter ages and sees his physical condition slowly degenerating, he is not bitter or angry. His perception is that the gradual deterioration of

his body cannot be escaped, so he does not bother to fight it. As a result, he is prepared for death, when he must finally face it. For Levanter, it is natural to embrace those things over which he has no effective control. His cultural heritage is another case in point. According to Tom Teicholz, "...the theme of Jewishness, a theme first mentioned in *The Painted Bird*," is finally renewed in *Blind Date*. (Teicholz 1978, 148) The previous Kosinskian men were deliberately ambiguous on this issue. To be sure, *Blind Date* only begins this exploration of what Thomas S. Gladsky refers to as his 'ethnic past' (Gladsky 1988, 127), but subsequent novels, such as *The Hermit of 69th Street*, go on to explore it at much greater length. The Kosinskian man knows that he cannot be true to himself if he insists on hiding important biographical details from those he encounters. As the life returns to the Kosinskian man, in *Blind Date*, there is a commensurate "mellowing of tone." (Bruss 1981, 215) This Kosinskian protagonist is the first to have a legitimate chance of rejoining and reengaging with the world around him. He is determined not to squander his opportunity. Unlike the others, Levanter does not make the mistake of becoming fixated on control. He is mindful that control is an illusion and that the effort to gain the upper hand in each social interaction is ultimately counterproductive and self-defeating.

SECTION VII - REINVENTING THE KOSINSKIAN MAN

Blind Date is a significant novel in Jerzy Kosinski's fictional canon because it marks the beginning of the Kosinskian man's reengagement with the world. The promise of reintegration, strongly hinted at in the conclusion of *The Painted Bird*, was not realized in *Steps* and *The Devil Tree*. And while Tarden professed an interest in recovery, his attempts were clumsy and ultimately abortive, sabotaged by his need to dominate all those he encounters. Levanter is less controlling. Instead, he is experiencing a belated process of opening up. Levanter realizes early on that true control is an impossibility.

Like his friend, Jacques Monod, he conceives life as a series of essentially random events. In *Blind Date*, Levanter abandons himself to the idea that little more than happenstance governs what occurs in the course of a lifetime. Moreover, he views the artificial imposition of such a plot on everyday life as a grievous error, if not an outright delusion. In his 1977 novel, Kosinski explores the idea that others are unknowable and that each interaction is in fact a blind date with destiny. From moment to moment, anything can happen. To attempt to effect control of these interactions would jeopardize Levanter's reentry into the world of conventional social interaction. *Blind Date* is unique among Kosinski's novels because Levanter is not engaged in a protracted war with society. Instead, he does battle against injustice and attempts to protect the rights of the individual. The resulting text thus has a less severe ambience than Kosinski's previous work.

In *Blind Date*, Kosinski intermingles his personal biography with his fiction. At times it is difficult to determine where the fiction ends and autobiography begins. In his 1986 *Esquire* piece, Kosinski refers to this manner of writing as 'autofiction.' Throughout *Blind Date*, the appearance of historical figures such as Henry Kissinger, Charles Lindbergh and Jacques Monod, as well as a character based on his first wife, Mary Weir, further blur the line between fiction and autobiography. There are a number of points in *Blind Date* where Levanter's life matches what is transpiring in Kosinski's own. For example, Kosinski includes an unconventional scene in which he speculates into the final thoughts of the victims of the Manson family. Kosinski maintained he was supposed to be at Sharon Tate's house the night of the murders, but a luggage mix-up forced him to cancel his trip. Skillfully bestriding the line between life and art, Kosinski's sixth novel deliberately makes reference to his previous fictional works a number of times. In one scene, Levanter encounters a cabbie who knew him (or at least the terrified youngster Levanter used to be) in the old country. From the man's description of the young Levanter, there is little doubt

that he is making reference to the protagonist of *The Painted Bird*. When reading *Blind Date*, the reader has the impression that Kosinski has opened himself up entirely, and that the novel is about the convergence of his life and work. Without doubt, the author and his protagonist have moved much closer together. This is a very deliberate technique which Kosinski employs (in addition to using a third person narrator) in order to alert the reader to the fact that Levanter is a more open protagonist and will not be striving to influence the reader's opinion of him.

Levanter is perhaps the most stoic of the Kosinskian men, unquestioningly accepting the role that chance plays in his life and realizing that each moment might potentially be his last. While Levanter is not the first protagonist to conceive his life in these terms, his reaction to the blind dates (e.g. coincidences and unexpected dangers) which inevitably pop up in front of him is entirely unique. Since Levanter has long ago given up trying to find a larger meaning in the things that happen to him, he is able to deal with each blind date as an independent event, unconnected to anything around it. He has no choice but to live his life from moment to moment, hoping for the best. Levanter thus escapes the trap that Tarden fell into, of endlessly attempting to effect control over his life. The phenomenon of the blind date plays a large role in Levanter's life. He encounters many important people in this way, from his wife, Mary-Jane, to Charles Lindbergh, to his friend Woytek. Viewing life as a series of blind dates helps Levanter to understand the world around him. With both Foxy Lady and Serena (two more people he encounters entirely by chance), Levanter learns that the surfaces of objects often disguise what is underneath and that few things are actually as they first appear. Foxy Lady, for example, turns out to be a transsexual, while Serena is a high priced prostitute. Levanter did not have any idea with whom he was dealing in either case. As the novel progresses, Levanter comes to see the truth as something which must be sought out. Still, his understanding of how the blind date functions keeps him from acting hastily or out of bitterness. On the

contrary, each of Levanter's blind dates are fascinating case studies of the unpredictable nature of life, and the eternal mystery of human identity.

One of the factors which distinguishes *Blind Date* from *Steps* and *Cockpit* is its use of humour. Levanter is not as interested in matters such as revenge. Instead, he is a prankster. The rage which had traditionally distinguished the Kosinskian man up until this point has begun to melt away. Levanter plays with children, listens to others and is capable of laughing at himself. In general, he is not a compulsive man and does not need to terrorize or punish the other characters. He is by far the most open of the Kosinskian men. In William Plummer's review of *Blind Date* for *The Village Voice*, Levanter is described as having developed a conscience. (Plummer 1977, 78) Similarly, The *New York Times* review speaks of Levanter as possessing 'scruples.' (Leonard 1977, 33) Levanter is not the sort to sit idly by while others are mistreated. He wishes to strike back against all forms of political repression. Though his methods are similar to Tarden's, his aims are profoundly different. For example, when he murders the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs of Indostran, Levanter is trying to make a statement about the repugnance of political repression. Tarden does not usually have such high-minded aims when he employs violence. Levanter, in contrast, seeks to enhance the meaning of his own life by attempting to ease the lives of imprisoned intellectuals. Though his efforts are not always successful, Levanter is determined to illustrate that one man still has the power to influence events in a positive way.

Through his efforts to permanently alter the oppressive political landscapes which he encounters, Levanter begins the first stage of the healing process. The second stage involves reengaging with others in loving relationships. Unlike Tarden, Levanter is capable of a plethora of diverse emotions, from regret and sympathy to joy and satisfaction. The numbness that defined Tarden and the protagonist of *Steps* has begun to dissipate. As he

gradually learns to care about others, Levanter grows more connected to the world around him. While Tarden is indifferent to people's fate and never seems to think twice about hurting others, Levanter is different. He dwells on Nameless' rape and seems to feel genuine regret at the thought of having hurt her. He tries to make up for this in a dramatic lovemaking episode with Pauline. Afterward, both he and Pauline are described as being liberated by the experience. In essence, Levanter heals himself through the act of healing someone else. With Pauline, if only for an evening, Levanter finally satiates his need to thoroughly know another person.

Similarly, Levanter's marriage to Mary-Jane is significant in allowing him to open himself completely to another person. With her as his wife, Levanter gradually learns that he is capable of altruism. After being diagnosed with terminal cancer, Levanter takes care of his wife. He is devastated as he watches her slowly withering away. Who is this new protagonist, this man capable of such acts of unselfishness? Prior to *Blind Date*, the reader has not encountered him. This would appear to be a whole new beginning for the Kosinskian man. The ultimate proof of this comes when Levanter is trapped in a blizzard. Levanter faces his own death with equanimity. He calmly accepts what he is powerless to change. In *Blind Date*, the healing of the Kosinskian man appears to be nearing its completion, but it remains unclear, as he enters middle age, if his growing connection to the world around him will continue. Judging by the previous incarnations of the Kosinskian man, nothing can be taken for granted. Indeed, any mid-life crisis he might be forced to suffer could well undo the progress he has made up to this point.

CHAPTER FIVE

DECONSTRUCTING JERZY: THE KOSINSKIAN MEN AND THEIR CREATOR IN CRISIS

SECTION I - THE FINAL KOSINSKIAN MEN

> O'Flaherty spoke easily: "What was the trouble with Duncan? With Frank and with Shellman, for that matter, and with so many of the others we've considered and have had to reject? The damn trouble was that they all had background, too much background! A man's past cripples him: his background turns into a swamp and invites scrutiny!" (BT, 116)

Published some twenty years before his suicide, this passage, about the viability of Chance as a candidate, from the final pages of *Being There* (Kosinski's third novel), is an eerie portent of Kosinski's ultimate fate. Tragically, Kosinski's foibles had become his undoing. His equivocations, conceits and paranoid idiosyncrasies eventually entangled him in a complex web of lies. Originally spun to protect him from others, they instead ended up entrapping him. His prodigious talent for storytelling, the ultimate source of his notoriety, came back to haunt him. Kosinski had staked his entire reputation, and indeed his very identity, on the notion that he was the ultimate survivor. When it became clear that not all of these claims were correct (or at least readily verifiable), his life began unraveling. On June 22, 1982, the *Village Voice* published a piece entitled "Jerzy Kosinski's Tainted Words." For the first time, questions were raised about Kosinski's representation of himself as a self-made man. Though the article is scatter-shot, especially viewed in light of James Park Sloan's definitive biography published eighteen years later, it makes a number of disturbing allegations, not all of them inaccurate. Why, for instance, had Kosinski not been straightforward regarding the editorial assistance he frequently employed in the production of his novels? Did he really believe that his constantly evolving personal history would never be seriously challenged or investigated? Had *The*

Painted Bird been translated (without acknowledgment) from Polish? Was the CIA in any way instrumental in the publication his first two nonfiction books, *The Future is Ours Comrade* and *No Third Path*?

The *Village Voice* piece did not shed much light on these questions—especially why Kosinski was so reluctant to reveal the precise details of his life—but by raising these questions, it effectively scuttled his credibility. He would never again be Jerzy Kosinski, world famous novelist. There would always be a taint on his name. In an odd way, it became irrelevant if Kosinski had actually lived through the terrifying experiences recounted in *The Painted Bird.* His reputation as a writer of consequence was sullied. Even suing the two *Village Voice* writers, Geoffrey Stokes and Elliot Fremont-Smith, would not restore his good name. Though his closest friends may not have cared, his readers and critics (and especially future biographers) certainly would. The *Village Voice* article and its aftermath had become a blight from which it was impossible to recover.[1]

That which he most feared was now playing itself out before his eyes. Having lived so long under both Nazism and communism, Kosinski knew the inherent risk of revealing too much to others. Now his penchant for contrivance became the source of his problems. Once again he was 'the boy,' wandering alone, being misjudged, persecuted and (he believed) mistreated by those around him. In only a short matter of time, he had gone from cult hero to scandalized novelist. Throughout the rest of his days, Jerzy Kosinski would never again be fully trusted. As Stokes and Fremont-Smith put it in their article, "almost nothing he [Kosinski] says can be relied on; everything must be checked." (Stokes & Fremont-Smith 1982, 41) In his biography, James Park Sloan's reports that by the end

[1] After his suicide, other journalists such as John Taylor in *New York* magazine (15 July 1991) and James Park Sloan in *The New Yorker* (10 October 1994), raised even more damaging questions. The new charges had to do with *The Painted Bird* and *Being There.* In the case of the former, it was alleged that Kosinski was never physically separated from his parents during the war. With regard to the latter, a distressing similarity was noted between *Being There* and Tadeusz Dolega-Mostowicz's novella, *The Career of Nikodem Dyzma.*

of Kosinski's life, "being Jerzy Kosinski [had become] an endless and strenuous task," so much so that Kosinski is reported to have remarked to a friend that even he had grown tired of himself. (Sloan 1996, 357 & 440) In that sense, his ultimate decision to end his own life might be interpreted as a method of seeking relief from his suffering—from how he thought others perceived him. In his final years, Kosinski endured a tremendous number of setbacks. However, it is also true that from 1977 to 1982, prior to the *Village Voice* article, he enjoyed a number of triumphs. These personal and public victories, such as writing an award winning script for the big screen version of *Being There* and playing the role of Grigori Zinoviev in Warren Beatty's *Reds*, put Kosinski in the spotlight like never before. Together with his numerous appearances on popular network television talk shows, such as *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, Kosinski had achieved a level of prominence unknown to most novelists.

During this period of the late seventies and early eighties, his face and personality were far more widely known than his fiction. Paradoxically, this media superstardom planted the seeds of his destruction. At his peril, Kosinski had ignored his own father's advice to "live your life unnoticed." (Sloan 1996, 8) According to James Park Sloan, an effusively admiring cover story in *The New York Times Magazine* (21 February 1982) by Barbara Gelb, the wife of that newspaper's deputy managing editor and a personal friend of Kosinski's, was the beginning of the end. Those who were skeptical of Kosinski's claims now had a rallying point. *The New York Times* had gone on record with a number of Kosinski's prevarications and obfuscations. It became inevitable that the *Village Voice* or a similar publication would begin probing into his personal affairs and would unearth a number of disturbing discrepancies. After the publication of Stokes and Fremont-Smith's article, Kosinski realized that his life would never be the same. Taken together with what he perceived as a steep decline in his health, Kosinski found it impossible to go on. He spent his last years writing and then reworking *The Hermit of 69th Street: The Working*

Papers of Norbert Kosky (1988 and revised in 1991), in the vain hope that such a work of 'autofiction' might explain how history and fiction—not just in his case, but in the lives of all men—were inexorably intertwined.[2]

Kosinski's life went through a number of important changes between 1979 and 1988, including how he saw himself. His achievements prior to June 1982, followed by his discomfiture in the period afterward, affected his writing. For example, Kosinski's seventh and eighth novels, *Passion Play* (1979) and *Pinball* (1982 and revised in 1983), demonstrate his waning interest in the theme of integration. Instead, Kosinski returns to issues which had been unexplored since *The Painted Bird.* The final Kosinskian men all have an unmistakable vulnerability, reminiscent of the young, nameless protagonist of the first novel. In the last three books, the Kosinskian man finds himself in unfamiliar territory. His crises tend to be rather banal affairs with those pursuing him far more likely to be creditors than secret agents. As his body and talent erode, and his youth fades, his familiar insecurity returns.

Through the final novels, the reader sees the Kosinskian man in decline. In this chapter, there will be a discussion of the significance of Kosinski's own (private) mid-life crisis—playing itself out in *Passion Play* and *Pinball*—and the (public) literary scandal which hung over the last years of his life, as he obsessed over *Hermit.* The goal here is to elucidate the close relationship between Kosinski's biography and his fiction. *Hermit* is the realization of a plan to create a new style of writing in which history and fiction and autobiography might coexist more comfortably. In addition, it was designed to absolve Kosinski of what he saw as the worst of the charges made by the *Village Voice* article. Kosinski fervently wished to disprove the assertion that he had employed anonymous

[2] According to James Park Sloan, Kosinski felt that imagination precluded the possibility of an unbiased representation of past experience. Hence memory itself is also a kind of fiction. (Sloan 1996, 217)

editors to put together his books. (Stokes & Fremont-Smith 1982, 41) As a result, he decided to produce an entirely original work that no one could question was his handiwork. In the end, he settled on a basic premise: rather than contest the *Village Voice's* charges, he would instead argue (and then illustrate at great length) that all writing is beholden to the works that precede it. Though *Hermit* could arguably be said to have achieved this goal, it was at a terrible cost. The book is neither readable, nor accessible nor comprehensible. Kosinski himself comes through loud and clear, however. *Hermit* allows the reader to visit Kosinski's inner sanctum, to see how his mind functions and the eclectic sources from which he picks and chooses to create his fiction. The book has deliberately been presented in a raw, unfinished manner, so as to create the illusion of viewing not only a man's basic thought process at work, but also the very manner by which he creates.

Though *Hermit* is designed to appear as a work stopped in midstream, long before it was finished, it nevertheless originates from Kosinski, who is present on virtually every page. What makes the book an authentic journey to the heart of the writing process is its inherent ambivalence. Kosinski created *Hermit* in order to reveal himself more fully, yet in another, no less valid sense, he is lost within this text. While he is there, to be sure, he also does what comes most naturally to him: hiding. The games Kosinski plays, to make the book so irritating (e.g. it is constructed along the lines of a nonfiction textbook, yet it does not contain an index) and silly (e.g. nearly all the jokes take the form of sophomoric puns about sex) and unreadable (e.g. there is no conflict within the text that the reader is waiting to see resolved) seem designed to make people put the book down, to read anything else, to frustrate and impede any quest to know him better. It is hard to imagine recommending *Hermit* to a friend. It is as though, at the last possible moment, Kosinski reconsidered his position, realizing that his readers, above all, could never be trusted with

any information which might help answer the question: Who is Jerzy Kosinski? *Hermit* is merely a series of clues to his identity, nothing more.

Ironically, this attempt to conceal himself reveals an important part of who he is. Ultimately, what defines Kosinski is his contradictory behaviour, his ambivalence about life. At times he seems to want to hide, yet he seems incapable of staying out of sight for any length of time. Indeed, publishing (even under a pseudonym as he did with his nonfiction books) and appearing in a Hollywood movie and on national television is not the act of a man wishing to live his life unnoticed. There is a recurrent pattern here: from moment to moment, he cannot decide whether his shyness or his exhibitionism will hold sway. Of course, *Hermit* is not an autobiography by any stretch of the imagination, but it comes as close as Kosinski would ever dare to telling anyone who he really is. In *Hermit*, Kosinski takes the reader on a journey through the mind of a tortured novelist. Along the way, he challenges traditional assumptions about character and structure. Through his vast "labyrinth of words" *Hermit* eventually arrives at what *The Washington Post* refers to as "Kosinski's inner self, his soul." (McCaffery 1988, 1) The protagonist of *Hermit* is different from Fabian and Domostroy, and even Osten, who are "Kosinskian" to the extent that they are immediately recognizable as characters created by Kosinski. Norbert Kosky is a Kosinskian man in another sense: he is very nearly indistinguishable from Kosinski, the public persona and author.

With the death of Kosky, the final protagonist, the life cycle of the Kosinskian man is finally complete. The last protagonist dies alone, an exhausted shell of a man, his past success but a distant memory. In the final three novels, the respective protagonists are subjected to every possible indignity, from humiliating medical examinations, to having to accept demeaning employment, to wrinkled bodies and balding pates. Domostroy, for example, a once world acclaimed composer, sustains himself by playing the electric organ

in a seedy restaurant/arcade in the South Bronx. The reader assumes the role of voyeur, watching these fragmented protagonists falling apart. If there were a physical embodiment of John Barth's 'literature of exhaustion' it would be Norbert Kosky. Or to put it in the postmodern wordplay of *Hermit*, the deteriorating and degenerating Kosinskian man has himself become a debilitated and dilapidated degenerate. The other protagonists, Fabian and Patrick Domostroy, choose a sort of voluntary exile in which they consciously reject contact with others. They only venture out into the world in order to scrape together enough money to live for another short span of time. To be sure, the creativity which once defined each of them is in eclipse. These disillusioned, downtrodden men deliberately isolate themselves from others. They believe that, on balance, others are better off without them. They are ambivalent with regard to romantic attachments as well as family life. However briefly, when they do emerge from their insular lives, things often end badly. They live in perpetual crisis mode, not really trusting anyone for very long. Marriage, to them is a dead-end. Apprehensive of the sometimes painful consequences, the last Kosinskian men tend to prematurely disengage from intimacy as a kind of defensive strategy, perhaps to forestall their eventual repudiation by their partners.

Passion Play is very much in the tradition of *Steps*, *The Devil Tree*, *Cockpit* and *Blind Date* in that it consists of fragmented vignettes, flashing forward and backward through Fabian's life. As *Passion Play* opens, Fabian—the latest Kosinskian man—is shown riding (and driving) through life all alone, except for his two horses, inside the insular world of his luxurious, climate-controlled, custom-made VanHome. Like all of the previous Kosinskian protagonists, Fabian is inherently conflicted. He possesses extraordinary talent for a team sport—polo—yet he knows he can never be happy on such a squad: the other players pose a continual threat to his individuality. After his experiences during the war losing his entire extended family to "one of the biggest [arson] fires ever," (PP, 230) he has come to the conclusion that "collective responsibility [not

only] diluted one's faults, but also diminished one's achievements." (PP, 35) Fabian wishes his prodigious talent to be acknowledged as something pure, not deriving (in even the smallest degree) from his being a member of a team. He travels about the world in search of high stakes, one-on-one exhibition matches in which his genius may be utilized to vanquish just one (usually incredibly wealthy) opponent at a time. Though *Passion Play's* Fabian is a Kosinskian hero, he is very nearly destitute and must struggle to survive from day to day. Because of this, he is a protagonist who looks at himself with ambivalence, something not seen since *The Painted Bird.*

Pinball departs entirely from Kosinski's fragmented style and utilizes a much more conventional approach. It is about Patrick Domostroy, a former composer who has lost the ability or will to compose, and the challenges he faces in undertaking a new job: unmasking Goddard, a mysterious rock star. The central question in *Pinball* is not who Goddard is (because Kosinski shares this information early on), but rather whether Domostroy's plans will be successful in flushing Goddard out of the seclusion and safety of his so-called New Atlantis, "his own House of Sound." (Pinball, 137) There are two essentially separate plots—one about Domostroy's life and other about Jimmy Osten/Goddard—which intersect only occasionally. Fundamentally, *Pinball* is a mystery novel in which the reader waits to see how the protagonists will react to each other when the truth is finally revealed. *Pinball* is structured in a very synthetic manner, around a series of utterly improbable coincidences. Outside of the presence of Domostroy in this novel, it does not feel particularly Kosinskian. Here, Kosinski appears to be moving away from his usual realistic treatment, in favour of a technique which deliberately draws attention to how plot functions, thus creating a sense of dislocation from the subject matter.

Hermit is not really a novel in the strictest sense, but rather the realization of Kosinski's autofictional vision. In it, he engages in wordplay, toys with his own biography, explores intertextuality and experiments with a self-reflexive analysis of his previous work. By definition, *Hermit* is a work stopped in progress by the death of its protagonist, a renowned writer. In that sense it cannot be a novel, since it is only Norbert Kosky's working papers, which might one day have become a novel, had Norbert Kosky not abruptly disappeared. In *Hermit*, life and art are inextricably fused together. The book is about the narrative and creative process and functions as a sort of literary inquiry into why writers write. The blurring of fiction and reality, which occurs throughout Kosinski's novels, reaches its apex in *Hermit*. This final book depicts not so much a survivor going through his life (the usual subject of Kosinski's fiction), as the agonizing process writers must live through in producing their work. Through its seemingly endless and eclectic collection of citations, recollections, dreams, jokes, footnotes, editorial asides, tangents, puns and digressions, Kosinski is, in effect, answering his critics. Rather than argue that he is indeed the author of his previous novels (in answer to the *Village Voice* article which alleged that this was not the case), Kosinski tries to persuade the reader in a different way, by first "laying siege to the concept of authorial originality" (McCaffery 1988, 9) and then showing that no one else could possibly bring all these elements to bear in a Kosinski novel except Kosinski himself. (Lupack 1988, 261) In *Hermit*, subtext not only takes precedence over, but also subverts the text itself.

Though the last novels do not depict a protagonist anywhere near as emotionally hollow as the earlier Kosinskian heroes, they are nevertheless men who have absented themselves from society. *Passion Play*, *Pinball* and *Hermit* track a painful process of devolution, as the Kosinskian man gradually grows more decrepit and despondent. This new protagonist tends to be so tired and old that he appears merely as a distant relative of Tarden and Levanter. His alienation, though of a different type than the boy's in *The Painted Bird*,

results in much the same outcome: he feels he must hide from others. Though the final Kosinskian men are older than their predecessors, they remain remarkably immature, essentially overgrown adolescents and dirty old men. The reason they are still identifiable as Kosinskian heroes has to do with their basic issues. They remain concerned with matters such as identity, victimization, their alternating status as both insiders and outsiders, the inherent tug of war between individuals and their societies, the struggle for voice and the inability to make oneself understood, the fragmentation of memory and how it tends to frustrate even the possibility of objective truth, the 'unknowableness' of others, the need to disguise their identities, the wish to dominate others and to engage in voyeuristic mischief, and the desire to test limits. Taken together, these three novels portray a process of deterioration, from what the Kosinskian man once was to what he has been reduced to, in *Hermit*. Of course, it is only by looking at the final novels together (and in retrospect) that the reader sees the path into poststructuralism that *Hermit* eventually takes. In the remainder of this chapter, the discussion will centre around two areas. The first section consists of an examination of the Kosinskian man in crisis (in the last three books), in the context of the chaos of Kosinski's personal life from 1979 to 1991. The second section will explore the significance of Kosinski's employment of an autofictional framework around which to construct *Hermit*.

SECTION II - THE CRISIS OF MIDDLE AGE

a) The Kosinskian Man in Decline I - Fabian

Beginning in *Passion Play*, the Kosinskian man tends to be portrayed as a spent force. While earlier Kosinskian heroes such as Tarden were resolute in their undertakings, the last protagonists tend to be insecure, lonely, exhausted, fragile and fearful. Indeed, in comparison with their predecessors, they are downright lethargic. In the opening pages of

Passion Play, Fabian is shown sitting in a restaurant, being ridiculed by a group of students to whom he refuses to relinquish his table. The scene is structured very much like Levanter's encounter with the rude Soviet tourists in the Swiss Alps in *Blind Date*. From earlier novels, the reader has been conditioned to anticipate some sort of savage retribution that will turn the tables and scare the life out of the students. Instead, the best Fabian can come up with is to wipe dog urine on their coats. Compared with how Tarden would have dealt with a similar situation, Fabian's response is something of an anticlimax. It is almost as though Fabian cannot be bothered to think of a more suitable and creative retribution, or else he has mellowed to such an extent that he now sees such Tardenesque displays as unseemly and unnecessary.

When the reader first encounters Fabian, it is clear that he is no longer the formidable athlete he once was. His prodigious talent is in decline and his body is literally falling apart. This is a departure for Kosinski. In previous novels, the Kosinskian man has performed breathtaking ski stunts and participated in risky car races. In contrast, Fabian spends much of the novel ruminating upon the gradual but relentless disintegration of his body. He frets about his widow's peak, his gray pubic hair, his wrinkles, the blood in his stool, his chronic back pain and his fear of senility and prolonged sickness. Near the end of the novel, when he glances in a mirror, he flinches "at the gaunt figure watching him." (PP, 285) For the first time, a Kosinskian man is not just displeased with his appearance, but is actually taken aback by it.

Through a series of flashbacks scattered throughout the novel, it is made clear that Fabian was once a virile sportsman, defining himself almost entirely in terms of his athletic prowess. In *Polo Magazine*, for example, he is described as being a "a low-flying, self-created centaur, whose polo playing had become better known than that of any other player in American history." (PP, 199) Now things have changed.

> Frame by frame, the documentary of aging unreeled in his imagination: the bad faith of the balding patch, the descent of graying hair, the betrayal of the lashless eye, the juiceless eyeball, the waxless ear, the dry, freckling skin; the snares of pus in sputum, of bile in urine, of mucus in feces; the reflection that debauched the spirit. (PP, 12)

His physical decline is linked to a weakening of his vitality. In essence, this is the first protagonist to stumble under the weight of being a Kosinskian man. The mantle may be too heavy for a man of advancing years, who has been robbed of the certitude of youth. The previous protagonists were healthy and vigorous, confident men, with pride in their accomplishments; in his younger days, Fabian was undoubtedly the same. Now he is trading on his name and surviving by his wits more than his skill. Being Fabian is no longer glamorous; if anything, it has become a worrying burden. With the passage of time, he has become a pitiful facsimile of the romantic athlete that he was in days passed. Time and again, circumstances unfold which leave him feeling exposed, dispirited and frightened. In the first few pages of *Passion Play*, Fabian is shown half-naked, undergoing an uncomfortable and humiliating sigmoidoscopy procedure on his lower GI tract. Clearly, this version of the Kosinskian man will be defined by his ongoing vulnerability.

Eventually, Fabian recognizes that his last semblance of control has slipped away. This troubles him and he spends long stretches in sullen introspection, pondering what other humiliations and infirmities may await him. Before every match, Fabian engages in an elaborate purification and relaxation ritual. There is an obsessive-compulsive element to his behaviour, as though the extra time and care he takes in his preparations will compensate for his diminished skills. Complicating matters still further for Fabian is the excruciating physical pain of the injuries he has sustained over the course of his career. The inflammation in his back, for example, leaves him unable to find a comfortable position in which to stand, sit or lie. He experiences thigh, leg, ankle and foot pain and

must wear a brace in order to continue to ride. No matter how stringently he reorganizes his life, however, accidents still occur and injury will always remain an occupational hazard for sportsmen like Fabian. On some level, Fabian takes the aging process personally, as though his own body is scheming against him to deprive him of what little dignity still remains. As he physically crumbles, Fabian comes to see himself as a living archeological ruin. (PP, 13) Only by digging deep within himself, may he rediscover a vestige of the (Kosinskian) man he used to be.

b) Kosinski's Final Years

At this point in Jerzy Kosinski's career (after the publication of *Blind Date* but prior to the *Village Voice* scandal), his interests seem to be subtly changing. The nature of fame is now a primary preoccupation. With his career at its apex, Kosinski may have begun to realize that his best days no longer lay ahead. Almost instinctively, he begins to explore the nature of creativity. During this period, his protagonists are no longer adventurous small investors or angry secret agents. Instead, they are distinguished by their imaginative spirit. They include a player/writer, a down and out composer and a renowned novelist involved in a literary controversy. All of them once enjoyed a certain degree of notoriety, but more and more they find themselves out of the public eye. Kosinski's work begins to explore what happens when the artist's talent, in the latter stages of his life, begins to wane and he must cope with the gradual erosion of the talents which once defined him as a man. Certainly on the basis of how harshly his novels were being reviewed, it seemed unlikely that Kosinski would ever again enjoy the sort of critical success that distinguished *The Painted Bird* and *Steps*. To him it may have seemed that all he could expect in the future was further critical disappointment. Though he claimed to be immune to them, Kosinski's final three novels leave no doubt that he was very much affected by what critics and reviewers said about his books (and in the case of *Hermit*, about his life).

He may have been one of America's most visible writers, but his novels tended not to be major bestsellers. Only too late, he understood that his overexposure in the mass media could have only one outcome: as his uniqueness faded, the general public would become bored with his usual repertoire. As he struggled with these issues, his work became more autobiographically oriented, with each successive protagonist more worn down, both physically and creatively. As they come apart, they grow increasingly insecure.

The deterioration of Kosinski's own body became a major issue during the last few years of his life. Though his autopsy did not reveal any catastrophic illnesses, he nevertheless suffered from a number of minor ailments which he feared would grow worse as the years wore on. For example, he had been diagnosed with arrhythmia some years before and in the summer of 1990, experienced a seizure. (Taylor 1991, 26) This frightened him and led him to believe that he had to make a choice: take his life while he was still in possession of his faculties, or risk living on in a vegetative state, at the behest of others, after he had been rendered permanently disabled. He also seems to have believed himself to be in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. (Sloan 1996, 442) Moreover, he had a morbid fascination with going blind. (Schiff 1988, 119) Since a number of his relatives, including his father, had suffered strokes, Kosinski felt that this was likely to be a fate he would eventually share. He did not wish to become the object of pity and sometimes spoke about suicide to his friends. (Taylor 1991, 26) He steadily witnessed his world shrinking. His heart complicated every facet of his life: riding, skiing and even writing were now more difficult than they had once been. The medication for his heart tended to leave him groggy and forgetful. In addition, traveling and public appearances now took a great deal out of him. Kosinski may have anticipated a time, probably sooner than later, when he would be unable to participate in his favourite activities. This was particularly hard for Kosinski, a man who took pride in conquering whatever physical or mental challenges were placed in front of him.

According to James Park Sloan, by the end of his life, Kosinski had confessed that he had begun to lose his once prodigious sexual vigor. (Sloan 1996, 440) It appears, however, that this was not entirely due to aging. Reacting to the AIDS epidemic, sex clubs such as Plato's Retreat shut their doors permanently in late 1986. The closure of these sexual gathering places profoundly affected Kosinski. The sexual gymnastics which he witnessed in his favourite Manhattan clubs somehow energized his imagination. Once they were gone, he must have wondered whether he would ever be able to fill the void that their disappearance would leave in his life. He was, at heart, an observer of life and these clubs were the ultimate voyeuristic experience. As he said on the *Late Night With David Letterman* show, "I go there to write." ("Sex, Lies and Jerzy Kosinski") In a 1987 article about him in *Vanity Fair* magazine, Kosinski describes how much the clubs meant to him.

> "I'm truly a born voyeur—I love watching people. I love it! I never get bored. I can sit in what might appear to others to be the most uneventful place, and I am totally enchanted by what I see. It's the kind of enchantment you get from a fable. I went to all the clubs. I went to heterosexuals, homosexuals, trisexuals—my God, in the years in New York there is no aspect of American life I haven't seen. (Schiff 1988, 119)

He was never able to recapture what was lost when the clubs permanently shut their doors. More than most, Kosinski tended to define himself through sex. He was unashamed of his sexuality and viewed it as a natural extension of the survival instinct. After his early life under communism, Kosinski heartily embraced the sexual openness that he found in America in the 1960s. His visits to the sex clubs, his nude photography of women and transsexuals, his fascination with S & M, his need to visits brothels and his occasional affairs with young women were important parts of his life and his fiction. His exploration of his own sexuality seemed to fuel his imagination. As he aged, Kosinski's disappointment in life only seemed to grow. Because of his childhood experiences in

Poland, he must have realized that his swarthy appearance could betray his Semitic heritage, thereby endangering his life. (Taylor 1991, 27) This feeling, that his physical appearance was a liability, rendered him more insecure than he might otherwise have been. It may also have stimulated his abiding interest in disguise. In an interview, Kosinski remarked, "I love myself when I ski and when I'm on a polo pony. For one thing, I wear a helmet with a face guard longer than my nose..." (Collins 1980, 188) Kosinski longed to be conventionally handsome and said so in a number of interviews, over the years. After the release of *Reds*, for example, Kosinski told Barbara Leaming that "I would rather have played John Reed [than Grigori Zinoviev] and be handsome and glamorous, and kiss Diane Keaton." (Leaming 1982, 211)

An already tenuous sense of self-esteem and a failing body, together with the stress of the scandal, must have been a burdensome combination. Kosinski's suicide note speaks about his decrepitude. Apparently, one of his primary fears was that his second wife, Kiki, would have to spend her final years caring for him. Some of his friends report that he had also grown tired of the constant routine of being an (in)famous novelist and public figure. (Sloan 1996, 443) Nearly his entire adult life had been devoted to his art, developing the skills of self-promotion which were such an important part of his success as an author. It seems reasonable that after decades of tumult, Kosinski was simply exhausted at the very thought of continuing on in this manner. Though he enjoyed being a public figure, especially insofar as it brought his work to a wider audience, the *Village Voice* scandal taught him that all fame is fleeting. His childhood had set the tone for the rest of his life. No matter how well known he became, Kosinski's insecurities remained with him. There must have been times that he wished that he had followed his father's advice to live his life unnoticed. Once again, Kosinski's tremendous sense of ambivalence with regard to every aspect of existence—including whether or not to continue living—becomes apparent.

c) The Kosinskian Man in Decline II - Domostroy

In *Pinball*, the Kosinskian man is so torn apart that Kosinski finds it necessary to symbolically divide him into two characters: one a vibrant, young artist and the other a used up old man.[3] *Pinball* is about the latter's search for the former. In many ways, Domostroy's personal circumstances are even more dire than Fabian's in *Passion Play.* Whereas Fabian's talents were merely in decline, Domostroy's have eroded so entirely that he has lost the will (and/or ability) to compose. (Everman 1991, 138) Moreover, he cannot support himself on the basis of his eight previous recordings, just as Fabian's royalties from his books are insufficient for his sustenance. As a result, Domostroy is forced to seek out other employment, at pinball joints, restaurants, bingo parlors, dances and private parties. As Domostroy's audience gradually abandons him, the creative force within him dissipates. Robbed of the ability to compose, Domostroy becomes a hired gun. He will do just about anything to survive, including bastardizing his values and his knowledge of music in order to try and track down the faceless rock superstar known as Goddard. While Fabian accepts jobs that he might otherwise prefer not to, he nevertheless remains in control of his destiny. Domostroy is not as fortunate. In exchange for a relatively small amount of money and Andrea's sexual favours, he agrees to sell out his own value system. After encountering Andrea, the plot of Domostroy's life becomes one not of his own devising. This is something entirely new: it is almost as though the Kosinskian man has somehow been misrouted into another writer's mystery novel.

Domostroy is vulnerable in a way that is unusual for the Kosinskian man. From the outset, Kosinski describes his protagonist's life as being "a well-guarded fortress" from which he seeks to exclude others. (Pinball, 10) He has given up trying to restart his career

[3]The symbolism here is unmistakable: Goddard represents the person Jerzy Kosinski would like to have been, while Domostroy is a depiction of the person he eventually became. (Sloan 1996, 378)

and resigns himself to the idea that his former celebrity was illusory. He dreads an existence which includes neither friendship—because all of his confidants have left his sphere—nor passion. Indeed, the only reason Andrea sleeps with Domostroy at all is because it is part of their original arrangement, partial payment for his aid in tracking Goddard. Andrea does not bother to hide her true feelings and enjoys baiting Domostroy, asking him, for example, why it is that he does not kill himself. (Pinball, 77) She seems to be inferring that with his creative energy dissipated and his best work long behind him, there is no good reason for the prolongation of a sometimes painful and undignified existence. The loss of his talent for composition is much like the boy's incapacity to speak in *The Painted Bird*. Domostroy is effectively banished to the fringes of society. Without the capacity to communicate with others, he is forced to turn inward.

Though Domostroy physically resembles Fabian, insofar as they are both well into middle age, Domostroy is less fixated on his own physical decline. He is vulnerable for entirely different reasons, which have much more to do with everyday survival. Because of where he lives (the South Bronx, in an abandoned hotel), what he does for a living (a pianist in a third rate nightclub) and his former success (as a composer), Domostroy always seems to be staring into the abyss. He never knows what task he may have to undertake next in order to survive. This atmosphere of underachievement and its attendant shame adds a new dimension to the Kosinskian hero. He remains recognizable, but he is now a grand washout. His critics are merciless in denouncing his work, with one alleging that Domostroy had composed "himself into racial isolation." (Pinball, 11) Deprived of both notoriety and a steady income, he becomes the subject of levity, as his friends grow increasingly dismissive. They are simply unable to understand how a once world acclaimed composer could be reduced to such undignified circumstances. To them, such a life would be unthinkable. In this context, Andrea's query, as to why Domostroy

would not prefer to commit suicide, rather than carry on in this continuing humiliation of a life—an existence that seems to personify failure—takes on added significance.

His former attorney, Samuel Scales, is an exemplar of those who expected so much more of Domostroy and were disappointed in his failure to continue his writing and recording career. When Domostroy visits his office at the beginning of the novel, the lawyer is particularly condescending, joking about the "terrible things" he has heard about Domostroy and reproaching him for his "Gypsy living" and his "Mickey-Mousing" around. (Pinball, 44) This scene is significant because it reveals how Domostroy is seen (and thus treated) by others: because his unconventional lifestyle makes him difficult to categorize, it is not clear to others whether he is the ultimate individualist or an overgrown child. As a result, other characters feel that it is not inappropriate to treat him with either disrespectful amusement or open disdain. The other protagonist, Osten, sees Domostroy as a particularly unfortunate, perhaps even pathetic figure:

> Middle-aged, skinny, wrinkled, and balding, Domostroy moved through the room like a starved vulture. His voice had a hint of some foreign accent, and everything else about the man seemed foreign as well—his gestures, his quick glances and frenetic way of talking, his clothes forcefully sporty, his manner overly at ease. (Pinball, 105)

As he looks at Domostroy, all Osten sees is a physical wreck and a professional flop. He is mystified and contemptuous of Domostroy, writing him off as a person who once had an impact on the world, but is now inconsequential. While Osten is immediately aware of Domostroy's fascination with his girlfriend, Donna Downes, his ambivalence towards the older man is likely motivated by a fear that he might somehow end up like Domostroy, living in obscurity, a total flop. While Domostroy has not entirely ruled out the possibility of resuming his former career, he also realizes that it is increasingly unlikely.

First, he risks repeating himself. Second, his attempts to top his past successes will almost certainly displease his critics. Third, Domostroy is certain that he has little of consequence left to share with his listeners. By all indications, his lifework is already complete. Similarly, Osten must face up to the possibility "that one day the well of his music might become as dry and as soundless" as a desert. (Pinball, 139) Nothwithstanding Scales' admonition to Domostroy to simply "write music," presumably with little regard for the quality of what he is producing, Domostroy is of the opinion that "a good composer had to write to satisfy himself, not others." (Pinball, 219) This uncompromising belief in the importance of his own vision leaves Domostroy feeling isolated, forcing him into seclusion, away from fans and critics. Soon after, he is forgotten by both. The rest of his life is a search for new jobs, new experiences and new sources of inspiration, ironically, for a career he will probably never resume.

d) Kosinski's Shrinking Stature

During the last years of his life, Kosinski was increasingly isolated by his fame. Because of his childhood in Europe, he could not help being naturally suspicious of the ulterior motives others might be harbouring. And as he became the embodiment of that uniquely American phenomenon—the man more well-known for being famous than for anything he might have achieved in his life—he grew even more ambivalent about his notoriety. At the same time, he was struggling to reinvent his career in the face of withering criticism of his work. In the end, Kosinski was left with little choice but to resign himself to the idea that his fame would always be a double-edged sword. His frequent appearances in the media had made him a pop culture phenomenon, as well as one of America's best known writers, but this left him as a particularly conspicuous and convenient target for those who did not approve of either his lifestyle or (what they perceived to be) his politics. Indeed, his flamboyance—even today—seems to make any objective analysis of his work very

difficult, if not impossible, for many critics. Kosinski knew only too well that the disturbing and difficult topics he often chose to tackle would tend to make people react with their emotions, rather than their intellect. The harsh criticism which greeted all of Kosinski's work after *Steps*, grew exponentially as his career continued. During the last years of his life, Kosinski seemed to have made peace with the notion that there were those who would never give his work a fair shake. So many people had seen his acclaimed performance in *Reds* and watched his numerous appearances as a guest on network television talk shows that they felt that they already knew him. This feeling was enhanced by the way in which his novels were constructed. Critics frequently confused Kosinski with his protagonists, as though his fictional creations were simply empty vessels, specially designed to accommodate versions of true life adventures in which Kosinski himself had participated.

Making matters still worse, his reputation—even prior to *The Village Voice* scandal—had taken quite a beating. For example, there were a number of people, including Roman Polanski himself, who were skeptical about Kosinski's claim that he had been expected at Polanski's house the night that Sharon Tate and her guests were massacred by the Manson family. (Sloan 1996, 277) In addition, while serving as the President of PEN, Kosinski had been instrumental (along with Norman Mailer and a number of other prominent writers) in helping Jack Henry Abbott assure his early parole from Leavenworth Penitentiary. While in prison, Abbott had written *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison.* Allowing him to languish in jail was thought to be a waste of his talents. Tragically, a short time after his release, Abbott murdered a Cuban waiter named Richard Adan, outside a restaurant. In addition to his (small but significant) role in the Abbott fiasco, there was also a humiliating incident in which a student writer, Chuck Ross—in order to illustrate the difficulty of getting published—submitted a manuscript of Kosinski's National Book Award winning *Steps* to a number of literary agents and

publishers, including Kosinski's own. Not one of them recognized *Steps*. And they all rejected the manuscript.[4] Kosinski felt that this incident had the net result of diminishing him in the eyes of the literary community. In their unsigned report on this incident, *Time* entitled their story, "Polish Joke." It is left to the imagination of the reader to discern whether this title refers to Ross' prank or Jerzy Kosinski himself. (*Time* 19 February 1979, 94) During this period, in the late seventies, much of the criticism of Kosinski's work tends to be exceedingly personal. With reference to *Pinball*, for example, Stefan Kanfer, in *Time,* ends his piece by remarking upon what might have been: "What a premise! What talent! What a waste!" (Kanfer 1982, 87)

In his review of *Passion Play*, in *The National Review*, D. Keith Mano writes:

> Oh, I'll confess it (with relief now): I didn't read *Steps* or *The Painted Bird*. But *Passion Play* is affidavit enough: no one could write with such shabbiness, with such consistent and painstaking negligence, unless he had a God-given flair for mediocrity." (Mano 1979, 1313)

Mano goes on to remark, "Kosinski could stand a course in remedial imagination" and Kosinski "is a pseudonym for Harold Robbins" (Mano 1979, 1313) This sort of ad hominem attack became the norm for Kosinski's work. His fame and early success were a burden in the sense that critics were now expecting a *Painted Bird* every time out. This was clearly an impossible expectation of any author. Beginning with *Being There* (1971) and *The Devil Tree* (1973 and revised 1981), Kosinski had begun to be treated as though each successive novel that he produced was a step down from the stature he had enjoyed prior to its publication. Unable to manage what was being said and written about him, Kosinski had no choice but to get used to such devastating attacks. Of course, in order to continue his career, he had to have tremendous confidence in the importance of his artistic

[4]A similar incident befalls Domostroy in *Pinball*.

vision. Unfortunately, his own insecurity at being (or at least seeing himself as) an outsider—an issue with which he apparently struggled throughout his life—made him vulnerable to the unkind things that critics frequently wrote about his prose. Kosinski kept strict track of those articles written about him that he considered unfair. He seems to have taken them very much to heart when he set out to write what would be his final novel. In the aftermath of the literary scandal, Kosinski seems to instinctively turn inward (almost like the young protagonist of *The Painted Bird*), withdrawing from public life and spending increasingly longer periods in Europe, out of the prying eyes of the New York literary community. In his last books, this notion of a man in crisis becomes Kosinski's main focus, as each of his protagonists lives out progressively more precarious existences, perhaps almost as dubious as his own subsequent to the scandal. Like all writers, Kosinski wrote about what he knew best: a solitary man under siege was now how he saw himself.

In *Passion Play* and *Pinball*, Kosinski seems to be trying to prove to the reader (and perhaps to himself) that he is still capable of producing important novels, that middle age has not taken away from his game—and that he still possessed a prodigious talent for telling stories. By the time that he writes *Hermit*, however, his main concern has shifted. He is now less heavily invested in the art of writing: rather, his eye is now on history, on looking for a way to clear his name, even if it is in a way (by writing *Hermit*) that few people will read and even fewer will understand. More than anything, Kosinski is looking to vindicate himself of charges that he was not the sole creator of his work. He seems to be trying to influence the way in which he will be remembered. Will his name remain synonymous with *The Painted Bird*, the breathtakingly brutal and groundbreaking novel about a child's journey of survival during the war or will he be seen as just another journeyman writer, another man who never came close to realizing his potential? Kosinski conceived *Hermit* in an attempt to settle this matter once and for all.

e) The Kosinskian Man in Decline III - Kosky

Hermit is clearly a different sort of fiction than either *Passion Play* or *Pinball*, but the protagonist of this last book is nevertheless living through his own crisis. Norbert Kosky ruminates at great length about the deterioration of his body, especially the loss of his hair, which he finds particularly vexing. His hairline is a battlefield where he witnesses his mortality being played out. Each morning, before the mirror, Kosky must count up his losses. Ultimately, he realizes that weaves, transplants, comb-overs and toupees are unlikely to fool anyone: they are more apt to make him appear foolish and vain. Kosky's preoccupation with his appearance is related to his fear that women will find him unattractive, now that he is well past middle age. As a result, he tends to overcompensate. Everything in his life, especially his preoccupation with sex, relates to this fear that his virility has been compromised. He feels an overpowering need to prove that he has lost nothing, yet his determination to prove this is ultimately self-defeating. His potency becomes an issue primarily because he brings it into play...and on virtually every page of his working papers.

To be sure, Kosky is a particularly paradoxical character. Despite his physical deterioration, he remains by far the most oversexed of the Kosinskian men. For example, he sees the number 69 everywhere and in everything, like a mirage. Kosky feels that this particular type of coupling—69—is the ultimate intimacy, a perfect act of symbiosis. He lives for and in fact worships the intensity of this unique physical intertwining, in which one may simultaneously give and receive pleasure. Virtually no opportunity, no matter how contrived, is missed in incorporating the number 69 into the text of *Hermit*. For example, the last chapter of the book, Chapter 69, has only forty chapters that precede it. The protagonist's interest in numerology is one of several obsessive-compulsive behaviours which he manifests in the course of *Hermit*. Kosky is a man entering the final

years of his life, yet he is still fixated by games. In another of his rituals, Kosky seeks out double S's within the text, that is, pairs of words which start with the letter "S" (such as sexual samovar or spiritual sister). He then proceeds to mark those spots in the text where he finds them with "SS," the symbol for the elite branch of the German special police force which had responsibility for administering the concentration camps. The reader must conclude that like all the Kosinskian men before him, Kosky has been profoundly affected by his survival experience during the war.

Kosky may have cheated death, but he is haunted by memories of his childhood. Like many other survivors, he struggles with feelings of worthlessness. And since he remains at heart very much the introverted young boy he once was, his wartime experiences continue to dictate his behaviour in the present. For example, Kosky spends a portion of the novel hiding from others or walking about in disguise, often for no good reason. And at odd moments, often from out of nowhere, he flashes back to his early life. This occurs as he contemplates what sort of book he would next like to write.

> After six hours of concentration, he steps out of his concentration camp. What a Terezin! he exclaims, when he is instantly stopped by his narrative Jewish Soul. "You're a Jew! Your Inner State must be determined by hitlahawuth—the Hebrew for joy—a joy of life not to be spoiled by the four letters HITL reminding you of Hitler. Then," the Soul goes on, remember that Theresienstadt (called Terezin) was one of the most perfidious Nazi-Final Solution Concentration Camps. (Hermit, 29-30)

Kosky's thoughts tend not to stray—at least for very long—from the topic of the destruction of European Jewry. It is as though he is telling the reader: this is who I am. My war will never be over. This is a vital component in understanding this protagonist's often eccentric behaviour.

f) Kosinski as Survivor

Over the years, much has been made of the fact that Kosinski may not have been separated from his mother and father during the war years and almost certainly did not personally witness every vignette described in *The Painted Bird.* This type of analysis is not particularly helpful in shedding light on his work: fiction, after all, derives from the imagination of the writer. Today, it is believed that Kosinski's family spent the war years hiding in rural Poland. It is unclear whether or not he was ever separated from his parents, but this possibility cannot be ruled out. What is clear is that he spent a good portion of the first years of his life being warned against revealing his true identity to his neighbors. Living with a mother and father actively engaged in the same deception could not help but take a toll. Kosinski's youth was thus spent in denial of who he was. As a Jewish male, even his own body, however inadvertently, could betray his secret. His parents had no choice but to drill into him the idea that anyone outside the immediate family was a potential threat to his life. No one could be allowed to know anything about him. He lived disguised in the identity of a non-Jew.[5] Even the family's original name, Lewinkopf, was a threat to their lives. This was yet another detail which his father had to obscure, in order to help the family survive. Still, no matter how masterful his father's deception of the authorities may have been, the plan might have come undone at any moment: to be sure, few of Kosinski's other family managed to survived the war. Throughout the rest of his life, he remained fixated on concealment.

The events of *The Painted Bird* may or may not have been fiction, but the trauma Kosinski suffered as a child was real. The memory of this experience dominated the rest of his life and continued to influence his actions long after he escaped from Poland. His

[5]It seems likely that during this period, Kosinski developed the habit, which later grew into a full-fledged obsession, of trying to conceal or distort the details of his life. Indeed, throughout his life, he equivocated about everything, from his ethnic heritage, to his parents' biographies, to the details of Mary Weir's death.

fiction was his response to the war, his way of reconciling himself to what he had seen. In the last years of Kosinski's life, however, he wrote a number of articles and delivered several speeches drawing parallels between the suffering of average Poles, whose nation Kosinski characterized as being "the most traumatized" of the war, and the suffering of the Jewish people. (Leiderman 1987, 225) Any animosity between Jews and gentiles in Poland, explained Kosinski, "was a friction stemming from the proximity [of the two groups]." (Leiderman 1987, 225) This point of view is expatiated upon at length throughout *Hermit*. Furthermore, Kosinski now conceded that it was the generosity of the peasants which had allowed him to survive the war. (Sloan 1996, 421) Perhaps somewhat sardonically, biographer James Park Sloan concludes that Kosinski's revised position vis-à-vis Poland could only lead to one conclusion: that *The Painted Bird* must have "greatly distorted the situation in the Polish countryside, as he [Kosinski] personally witnessed it." (Sloan 1996, 421) Following this logic, Kosinski's first novel would appear to be a cruel exaggeration of Polish anti-Semitism and an ungrateful caricature of the peasants with whom he interacted in the course of the war.[6] Sloan sees this type of argument as intellectually indefensible and generally indicative of Kosinski's contrarian and evasive nature. Indeed, many survivors find *The Painted Bird* quite a tame account in comparison to the unspeakable atrocities that they witnessed in Poland. Because it served his purposes at this time—seeing as he was planning to return to Poland[7]—Kosinski wished to recant (or at least temper) what he had previously written about Poland.

As a major Polish celebrity, Kosinski had been invited to become involved in a number of projects which would help his homeland recover from its long domination by the Soviet Union. In addition to heading up the American Foundation for Polish-Jewish Studies,

[6]In *Hermit*, Kosinski writes, "...I would rather kiss every day the dirty feet of any Ruthenian peasant than ever again salute anything militaristically German..." (Hermit, 402)

[7]Kosinski visited Poland three times, in April 1988, April 1989 and again in September 1989. He took his own life just prior to what would have been his fourth trip in May 1991. He had originally intended to attend the official opening of Amerbank, a cooperative financial institution he was instrumental in helping create.

Kosinski also started his own foundation, The Jewish Presence Foundation and the Polish-American Resource Corporation. It was Kosinski's contention that within the Jewish community, the Holocaust had begun to crowd out all other discussions. Kosinski argued that Jews should celebrate their heritage, rather than dwell on an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to destroy them. This seems a particularly bizarre argument inasmuch as the Holocaust seemed to influence every aspect of Kosinski's life and writing. To Kosinski, however, it was more important to acknowledge the fact that Jews had been in Poland for hundreds of years prior to the war. Kosinski felt that this propensity—to disregard that Poland had once been the centre of Jewish life in Eastern Europe—was itself a tragic destruction of memory, in effect a "second Holocaust." (Sloan 1996, 437) Jewish accomplishments in academia, medicine, literature, philosophy, science, business and technology were virtually ignored. At this time, Kosinski tended to emphasize the suffering of other groups, apart from the Jews. For example, he informs the reader no fewer than three times, in the text of *Hermit* (as well as in a number of interviews at the time of the publication of that book), that millions of Soviet prisoners of war were killed by the Nazis and that half of all the Gypsies and millions of Poles also perished in the war. (Leiderman 1987, 222)

What Kosinski wanted was to move past the war. Intellectually, the quickest way to achieve this was to characterize the Poles as helpless victims, much like the Jews. In a 1987 television interview with Mike Leiderman, Kosinski called Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* "the biggest lie in the world" and "a fantastic trick." (Leiderman 1987, 225) In Kosinski's view, Polish anti-Semitism was no more or less virulent or pervasive than that found in the rest of Europe.[8] Kosinski denounced *Shoah* as encouraging a dangerously stereotypical view of Poland, perhaps not so dissimilar to the sort of intolerance openly

[8]In *Hermit*, Kosinski includes a footnote in which Jay Kay, the protagonist of Kosky's book, explains that *Shoah* is an attempt to discredit "my entire [Polish] nation" and that Lanzmann is "no longer a lanzman [or countryman] to me." (Hermit, 526)

encouraged by the Nazis towards the Jewish population of the countries that they invaded. Sloan reports that Kosinski was adamant in expatiating this view with whomever he spoke. For example, when he was asked, during a speech in Israel, what the Poles had done to save Jews, Kosinski is reported to have turned the question around, inquiring instead "What did the Jews do to save the Poles?" (Sloan 1996, 420) After the publication of *Hermit*, Kosinski seemed to lose interest in writing. The projects which now most interested him, near the end of his life, tended to involve reconstructing some of what had been lost in the war. At first, he became fascinated by the idea of restoring Kazimierz, the Jewish section of Kraków. When this plan fell through, Kosinski attempted to raise capital for a number of other projects. He became interested in setting up various ventures to export goods and to build luxury housing in Poland. When these plans did not pan out, Kosinski became interested in setting up an institution called Amerbank, the American Bank in Poland. After his suicide, Kosinski's wife Kiki took over as the bank's chairman. (Sloan 1996, 447)

g) The Breaking of the Kosinskian Man I - Rage & Despair

In *Hermit*, Norbert Kosky is still trying to reconcile himself to what he witnessed in Europe. Throughout the text, he ruminates on many different aspects of the Holocaust, from the modern phenomenon of denial, to the Nuremberg Trials, to the methods of the Einsatzgruppen, to the significance of the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale. He even keeps a comet, which he alternately describes as "a harmless modern-day replica of a harmless relic from my harmful past" and "a portable stove for a wartime Ruthenian Boy Scout" in the trunk of his car. (Hermit, 415) Kosky's views frequently diverge from the accepted wisdom. For example, Kosky defends the ruthless policies enacted by Chaim Rumkowski, the chairman of the Lódz ghetto. Though Rumkowski is sometimes regarded as a collaborator, Kosky instead celebrates his efforts to save some

residents of his ghetto by sacrificing others, typically the young, the sick and the elderly. As Rumkowski himself put it, "I have to cut off limbs in order to save the body." (Hermit, 211) Kosky seems very taken with Rumkowski, celebrating him as "a very good man and an extraordinary working-class leader" for his attempts to save at least a few residents of the ghetto. (Hermit, 391) At times it is not clear if Kosky holds such views for the purpose of enlightening or infuriating his readers. In any case, the war remains the most prominent event in Kosky's life, years after its conclusion. Even words sometimes prompt him to flash back to his childhood. *Burn*, for example, seems to kindle something within him. His great joy in experimenting with language and playing with the meaning of words prompts his mind to move off in several directions at once.

> Each time I write the word *burn*[9], I feel burned. Burned—but not burned out. Burned not by anyone in particular, but by the entire Western Civilization...Yet, while I feel burned by the Holocaust, I also feel torched by it: torched not scorched. With the word torch signifying light and <u>inner</u>[10] luminosity. (Hermit, 30)

This 'inner' Kosky is a significant component of *Hermit*. Throughout the book, there are numerous references to matters such as his inner state, inner terror, inner camp commander, inner ethic, inner alarm clock, inner physical examiner, inner public opinion poll, inner media, inner air assembly line, inner force, inner defiance, inner home, inner inquisitor, inner lights, inner speakers, inner censor, inner balcony, inner Buddhist monk, inner estate and inner working communication channel. Kosky even has an inner writer, Jay Kay (the protagonist of his new novel), with whom he carefully discusses—within the privacy of his own thoughts—the main thrust of his next book. (Hermit, 29) His inner life is truly a stream of consciousness, where he may explore whatever catches his fancy, from history and literature, to skin care and practical jokes. More than previous

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[9]Italics by Kosinski.
[10]Underlining by M.O.

Kosinskian men, Kosky functions as a self-contained unit: his is a world within a world. He tends not to place much faith in other people, so his relationships end up being no more than brief respites from a life spent largely within himself. His lack of confidence in others leaves him little choice but to gradually withdraw from society. Indeed, by the end of the novel he no longer lives in Manhattan but prefers to float around it, observing it, from the sanctuary of his boat. After becoming embroiled in a scandal, Kosky spends the second half of the novel trying to prove to his readers—and perhaps to himself—that he is a serious writer, producing significant work. But when his final novel is published and immediately adjudged a failure by the critics, he does not seem particularly surprised. At some level, he was expecting it.

The resoluteness which was an important component of the earlier protagonists has dissipated. Kosky is a beaten man. In these last three novels, all the protagonists share a notable lack of confidence. In *Passion Play*, for example, Fabian must compensate for his diminishing skills. Every aspect of his life, including his polo, is now encumbered by illness and pain. As he prepares for a one-on-one match, Fabian contrasts the way in which he sees himself, "as the gallant knight in a tournament of passion," with how others see him, "as the paltry clown in a carnival play." (PP, 80) He lives his life in anguish, unable to successfully project to others his own view of himself as a debonair hero engaged in a dangerous sport. Moreover, his financial straits are so severe that he literally cannot afford to lose his matches. If he does, he will forfeit everything for which he has worked. His personal life is every bit as desperate as his professional and financial situation. He is forever on the move, at least in part because he fears intimacy. His relationships tend to be rapid fire, over almost before they begin. Near the end of the novel, when Vanessa professes her love for him, Fabian is moved and is about to declare his feelings for her and his wish to remain with her, when he suddenly stops himself. (PP, 289) He remains silent rather than encourage Vanessa's syrupy attestations of

affection. Fabian is caught in a paradox: he feels genuine warmth toward Vanessa and longs to tell her so, but he knows that she will be better off without him. Fabian can be a mentor, but he is no longer competent to be a true partner. He has already lived a life and Vanessa deserves the chance to embark on hers without the encumbrance of her old riding instructor. If he were to take Vanessa with him on his travels back and forth, across America, she would eventually be transformed from his lover to his nurse. He does not believe that it would be advantageous for her to expend her youth in this manner. Fabian accepts that his place is in the VanHome, with the ponies.

In *Pinball*, Domostroy relates to Donna Downes in similar terms. Soon after they begin seeing one another, it becomes clear that Donna is the best thing that has ever happened to Domostroy. However, Domostroy is not convinced that he would be a positive influence on Donna' life. At the end of the novel, it is uncertain whether Domostroy intends to see her again. Domostroy's ambivalence speaks volumes: if he intended to change his life, he would embrace Donna and the vibrant energy and optimism she brings with her. The last thing he would want is for her to go away. Yet it appears he has no plans to prevent her departure from his life. Just like Vanessa in *Passion Play*, Donna's progress through life would only be impeded by the presence of an exhausted, desperate man tagging along wherever she goes. Preparing her for the Chopin competition in Warsaw is about all that Domostroy can contribute to her life.

> It was obvious that his presence would not benefit Donna's public image, and so he had decided to leave her alone. She had to be alone, in order to go from one success to the next, as she undoubtedly would: just as he, a witness to failure—which might one day still befall her, as it might any artist—had to remain alone, in his own refuge. (Pinball, 287)

When Domostroy creates a series of trenchant fan letters to Goddard on behalf of Andrea Gwynplaine (in order to awaken Osten's curiosity and make him desire to seek out Andrea), the missives are at least as applicable to Domostroy as they are to Goddard. In the end, the reason that his letters are able to compel Goddard to reveal himself has to do with their inherent verisimilitude. Inside "the black hole" of the Old Glory, the place he resides both literally and metaphorically (in contrast to Goddard's gleaming New Atlantis), Domostroy becomes an expert in seclusion and concealment. (Pinball, 78) It is Domostroy's awareness of what it means to be entirely alone that allows him to set a series of events into motion that impel Goddard, one of the best known (though nevertheless anonymous) artists in the world, to come out of his self-imposed seclusion.

h) The Breaking of the Kosinskian Man II - Denial

In a scene which is later replayed in the final pages of *Hermit*, Domostroy flashes back to a time when he was a guest on a TV talk show. When the host of the program poses a simple question to another guest, an exiled military leader, Domostroy feels that the query may as well have been addressed to him. The question is simply, "what went wrong?" (Pinball, 11) Domostroy is not sure how he came to find himself in his current circumstances, but he thinks that it was related to the way in which the critics mercilessly bombarded each of his compositions. (Pinball, 219) His refusal to kowtow to the judgments of these men and women only serves to infuriate them. Throughout *Hermit*, the critics savage Kosky. As though to beat them to the punch, Kosky tends to portray himself exclusively in self-deprecating terms. On the *David Mailman* television show, for example, he characterizes himself as a "first-rate second-rate novelist."[11] (Hermit, 81) Within the context of *Hermit*, Kosky's modesty does not appear as an affectation, but

[11] Sloan reports that in an interview with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Kosinski had described himself in similar terms, as a "very marginal novelist" and "lesser talent." (Sloan 1996, 370)

rather fits in with what is known of him from his working papers, all that the reader ever sees.

Trust does not come easily to these protagonists. At times, they seem incapable of forming the sort of attachments which typically define adulthood. In essence, they cannot or will not act their age. For example, despite getting on in years, Domostroy and Kosky still enjoy gallivanting about the city at night, in a manner reminiscent of the boy (after the conclusion of the war) in *The Painted Bird.* Fabian is not very different. Throughout *Passion Play*, he remains fixated on his deteriorating body and spends much of the novel in denial, trying to behave as if he is not well past his prime. He lusts after adolescent girls, pushes his body well beyond its limits in one-on-one matches, has affairs with married women, turns down financial opportunities which could have eased his transition from player to respected ambassador for his sport, fails to heed the advice of his editors to tone down the bleak nature of his writing, offends and endangers other players with his rough play and generally refuses to accept that he is no longer the powerful man he once was. In that sense, the VanHome is Fabian's accomplice: it aids and abets his flight from conventional responsibility. Domostroy's home inside the Old Glory Hotel plays a similar role, just as Kosky's "voyeuristic Nietzsche niche" in his apartment, serves as his command post, to hide from and observe the comportment of intruders. (Hermit, 139) In the last novels, the Kosinskian man's behaviour is hard to understand: he has disengaged from society, yet he cannot tear his eyes away from the world just outside his window.

All of the last Kosinskian men are remarkably insecure and impulsive. They behave in childish ways (Fabian injuring himself riding an unfamiliar horse, while trying to impress Vanessa at her birthday party), incessantly engage in word play (Domostroy's explanation to Andrea that "They—the critics, the audience—changed, and I [Domostroy] didn't.") (Pinball, 14), enjoy whimsical puns (Kosky deliberately conflating

"painted' and "tainted" birds), tell off-color stories (Domostroy's ruminations on the relative merits of belonging to the National Vasectomy Club), feel sorry for themselves (Domostroy's firm conviction, upon meeting Donna at the cockfight and chatting amiably with her, that she does not like him well enough to call him), behave recklessly (Fabian cutting off his finger, to refute the notion that he "wouldn't lift a finger" for his friend, Eugene Stanhope), attempt to conceal their identities (Kosky's affinity for disguise), are deliberately defiant (Kosky's insistence on "writing a novel about a suicidal writer named Jay Kay" (Hermit, 128) which is so idiosyncratic in structure that his publisher cannot sell one copy of it), instinctively engage in games of misdirection (Fabian affixing a nearly inexhaustible supply of different signs—each carefully selected to mislead burglars, vandals and car thieves—to the sides of the VanHome), and perpetrate odd pranks (Kosky hiding behind the pillows on a couch at the Industran Embassy, during a dinner party, and kicking the backsides of the Israeli ambassador, the Imperator and the Empress, to see how they will react).

Fabian is especially fond of such tricks. After Vanessa's birthday party, for example, he crams himself into the back seat of her convertible and waits until she is driving before revealing his presence. She is startled and nearly loses control of her automobile. It is unclear why Fabian risks both of their lives in this stunt. Because of his age and experience, it would be reasonable to expect him to exercise somewhat more prudence, but throughout the novel he acts more like a juvenile delinquent than a mature adult. On the polo pitch, Fabian seems deliberately disputatious in a manner reminiscent of former tennis great John McEnroe. A dirty and unpredictable player, the other competitors see Fabian as a maverick, a man equally comfortable bending the rules or ignoring them entirely, as it suits his needs. Dismissive of his teammates and unrelenting with his opponents, Fabian has a hard time fitting comfortably onto a team. He refuses to do those things which might help him get along with the others.

He takes a similar approach to his writing career. Though he knows it will hurt the sale of his books, Fabian insists on presenting riding as an inherently dangerous pastime. He refuses to sugarcoat the truth and feels that his readers must be enjoined to pursue riding only with tremendous circumspection. His books are designed to make riders aware of the risk they assume each time they climb onto the backs of such majestic, yet temperamental beasts. Fabian's fatalistic view of his own avocation, as expressed through his writing, further compounds his isolation, since readers and critics alike have no further use for his dismal outlook on the current state of equitation. Taken together with his reputation as a particularly dangerous and cagey opponent on the polo field, it is not surprising that Fabian remains an outsider, even within the relatively narrow circles in which he tends to travel. From inside his VanHome sanctuary, he resigns himself to an existence on the periphery, not only of society, but even of the sport he loves so well. Spurned by the teams he used to be a part of, he has no choice but to spend the vast majority of his time in the company of his horses.

Fabian does not mind being the messenger of bad tidings; in fact, he seizes on this role, telling his readers exactly what they least wish to hear. He is interested in exploring worst-case scenarios: how bad things can be, at their lowest point. His vision is desolate and joyless. Even the titles of his books are cynical: *The Runaway*, *Obstacles* and *Prone to Fall* seem selected to scare people away from riding, to make them associate this activity with the most violent sorts of traumas. Stella, one of Fabian's former pupils, inquires as to why he refuses to "write something easier to take?....Why bring up all those accidents, those traumas?" (PP, 197) He is only too aware that his detached style of writing irritates and alienates his readers, but he sees himself as an honest reporter of his times. He focuses on the perils of riding because he knows them so well. Though Fabian could not be unacquainted with the perception of his work by his most adamant critics, he refuses to tailor his books to suit them. Even to help his own cause, he is incapable of

compromise. As a result, the reviewers warn their readers to steer clear of Fabian's foreboding vision, lest it disturb their established sensibilities. Fabian, in turn, is dismissed as "a man without generosity, with a splinter of ice in his heart." (PP, 200) The impertinence of the reviews, which condemn not only the books but also the man behind the work, and in particularly withering terms, make Fabian defensive and more determined than ever to expatiate upon his dark view of equitation.

i) The Breaking of the Kosinskian Man III - Overcompensation

The last Kosinskian men are solitary figures. Loners by nature, they do not have relationships, just fleeting interludes. Domostroy, for example, confesses to Andrea that love does "not fit in with the trappings of my life." (Pinball, 23) In *Passion Play*, Fabian is afraid of what it will signal if he accepts Vanessa's gift. Though her seven-digit cheque would have allowed him to live the rest of his days in comfort, he declines it, fearing that the gift would ultimately bind him to Vanessa. Fabian prefers to face the world alone. He is a chivalrous warrior at heart "tilting against the world." (Kennedy 1979, 11) In this he does not much differ from the other Kosinskian men: they are all outsiders. Fabian's wish is to impart what he knows and then move on. He knows that staying with Vanessa would be counterproductive to her best interests. In a conversation with her father, Patrick Stanhope, Fabian admits his affection for Vanessa, but quickly explains, "That's why I could never marry Vanessa or take her away with me. And that's why I'll be leaving tomorrow, leaving without her." (PP, 295)

Fabian is typically attracted to much younger women because he enjoys introducing them to a world of free love and open sexuality with which they are unfamiliar. Whatever his other shortcomings, he remains proficient as a teacher. In a peculiarly Nabokovian rite of passage, he selects a different virginal girl from *The Saddle Bride* magazine at the

beginning of each year and then gradually—assuming the role of instructor, father and lover—guides her into womanhood. In these brief encounters, the girls come to know themselves as sexual beings. Their innocent exploration of their own bodies leaves them feeling empowered and confident, able to love themselves, as well as others. Fabian does not wish to indefinitely possess these young girls, nor does he wish to make them fall in love with him (though this frequently occurs). When they are ready, Fabian takes pleasure in turning the girls loose to explore the world with new and more sophisticated eyes. For all intents and purposes, Fabian is branding these women. (Lupack 1988, 227) He wishes to "take away the last of the girls' inhibitions, to free them from their restraint-filled past," but he has very little time in which to accomplish this task. (Lavers 1998, 264) Knowing that he must soon leave them creates a sense of great urgency which energizes the relationship.

These last Kosinskian protagonists assert their authority over women primarily because they can. It is a way of demonstrating that they are still powerful enough to make a difference in the lives of others. Sometimes, the Kosinskian hero is not entirely prudent in how he conducts himself with these young women. When Fabian sleeps with a sloppy woman out of convenience, a bizarre series of events is set in motion. Prior to meeting Fabian, the woman—who is never assigned a name—was unconcerned by or at least oblivious to her own drabness. Fabian changes this. When he leaves for his next engagement—at the house of a millionaire—the sloppy woman, who has fallen in love with Fabian, tries to follow. Several ugly incidents ensue, in which Fabian tries to make the woman understand that he does not return her feelings and does not wish to be with her. He sends her away a number of times, but she always returns. Eventually, Fabian explodes:

> "You've got nothing to give, nothing to share. Your emotions are as crude as your body, your mind as slow as

> your ass, your life as empty as your feelings. Your TV deserves your company—I don't." (PP, 170-171)

The next morning, the woman's corpse is found near the estate where Fabian was staying. Revealing how he perceived her, with such pinpoint precision, was too great a shock. The sloppy woman realized, all at once, that her own life was valueless. She finally understood the reason that no one could ever love her. It was her misfortune to encounter a man as contemplative and articulate as Fabian to critique her life. Without Fabian's intervention, dissolving whatever small amount of self-esteem she might have had, it is unlikely that the sloppy woman would have ever fully appreciated her undesirability. Though this scene is less physically brutal that most of what takes place throughout *The Painted Bird* (or the other novels for that matter), it explores a different kind of savagery: a violence against the soul. In that sense, it may be the cruelest scene in all of Kosinski's work. What becomes apparent from this episode is Fabian's poor judgment and immaturity. He should have recognized the woman's loneliness as a potential warning sign. At some level, Fabian knew that his words would probably devastate the woman, but he could not resist demonstrating his preeminence. He succeeds in building himself up by putting her down. In the end, he is more concerned with impressing the other houseguests at the mansion than he is in sparing the feelings of the sloppy woman.

Fabian is most attracted to young, desirable women, with limitless potential, whom he can completely dominate. He is looking for those who will carry out his wishes, including departing with dignity, when the time comes. Vanessa is one such person, who sees Fabian as gallant, despite his decline as an athlete. Indeed, the first time they are alone in the woods, Vanessa sucks on his fingers, like a small child. And even before their first kiss—in fact, even before they undress—she orgasms. There is something incestuous about this interaction, as the role of teacher, father and husband become interchanged.

Vanessa's sexual awakening becomes the focal point of Fabian's life. Their encounters are unusually intense, almost desperate. For a short period, Vanessa revitalizes Fabian—and comes to mean as much to him as any other person ever has. Indeed, at one point in the novel, Kosinski includes a three-page description of the appearance, smell and taste of Vanessa's genitalia. When the time comes for Fabian to go, Vanessa's training kicks in: though she wants him to stay, she does as he requests and vacates the VanHome. Fabian feels certain that she will eventually recover from the pain of their separation and will be a stronger person for it.

Domostroy also fancies himself an educator of women and is especially taken with Osten's girlfriend, Donna Downes. Donna is unlike any other character in *Pinball.* All the others, including Andrea, tend to see Domostroy only in farcical terms, as the personification of failure. Donna, however, is too perceptive not to realize that she and Domostroy are kindred spirits, with much more in common than she and Osten. In addition, she is contemplating a trip to Poland, where Domostroy once studied music, to compete in a Chopin competition. She feels, quite rightly, that he might be able to help with her preparations for the contest. Given her disinclination to harshly judge Domostroy's lifestyle, Donna is distinct from his other friends. Donna considers the whole man, not a particular moment from his life. She does not care how Domostroy spends his time. She simply wishes to know who Domostroy is. When she is around, Domostroy seems very strong and confident. Donna makes him feel as though he is still sophisticated and virile. Unfortunately, no one else in the novel seems to share this view.

As a result of her kindness towards him, Domostroy feels protective of Donna. Soon the teacher-pupil relationship is charged with sexual energy. At first, Domostroy does not act on his feelings, but just prior to her departure for Warsaw, he notices that Donna is distraught. Her playing has an "anxiety, a sense of doom, defeat, surrender...The energy

seemed to have gone out of her playing; the sound that had been flowing through her from within had lost its buoyancy." (Pinball, 249) It becomes clear that she thinks Domostroy no longer feels anything for her. Domostroy fears that this "inner turmoil" might negate her chances to succeed in Warsaw. (Pinball, 250) He is determined to help her master these feelings. When the scene begins, he is filled with self-doubt, wondering whether he might suddenly become impotent, thereby humiliating himself in front of Donna. This is typical of Domostroy. It is as though he has begun to internalize the things that others have been saying about him, that he is nothing more "than a cheap night club act." (Pinball, 231) He cannot conceive of a plausible reason for such a desirable woman to "respond to his desire." (Pinball, 208) Realizing how desperately Donna needs him to demonstrate his love, Domostroy is able to overcome his fear of hurting her or embarrassing himself. Instead, their lovemaking becomes a kind of gift to Donna, to allow her to dissipate the uncertainty which has adversely affected her performance. Their coming together is an act of purification in which Domostroy helps Donna realize her own potential as an artist and a woman. (Everman 1991, 143) Once Donna departs for Warsaw, Domostroy's old feelings return. He realizes, just as Fabian does, that it would be selfish to keep such a vibrant woman from fulfilling her destiny. Domostroy remains mindful that Donna is his student, not his possession. He knows that she would be better served by a man whose best days are not behind him.

Witnessing their own physical decline makes Fabian and Domostroy (and especially Norbert Kosky) obsessive about sex, as if they must somehow compensate for the deterioration of their other abilities. The virility of the Kosinskian man becomes an issue in these final novels because it is literally all he has left. An important role reversal has occurred. The Kosinskian men are so distracted by what amounts to performance anxiety that they have grown reckless. Their feelings of insecurity preclude their customary level of circumspection. As a result, both Fabian and Domostroy are run through their paces

by very demonstrative women. In *Passion Play*, for example, there is a cantankerous relationship between Fabian and Eugene Stanhope's mistress, Alexandra Stahlberg, a beautiful fashion model and actress. Visiting the Stanhope estate, Fabian unexpectedly finds himself alone in the VanHome with Alexandra. A night of passion ensues. The next day, Alexandra tells Eugene about the affair, except she twists the story to make it appear as though Fabian deliberately got her drunk and forced her to stay against her will. Alexandra's prevarication is perfectly constructed, utilizing elements of the truth, to make Fabian appear ungallant, jealous and ungrateful. Fabian is trapped: the truth will not vindicate him, only make him appear more duplicitous. Alexandra definitely enjoys being the centre of attention. Though it is not clear what she stood to gain by coming between the two friends, it seems likely that she wished to demonstrate her dominance over Fabian. More than anyone else in *Passion Play*, Alexandra is able to compel Fabian to do things which are clearly counterproductive to his own purposes. She is the first woman to have this sort of effect on the Kosinskian hero.

In *Pinball*, Domostroy debases himself by entering a relationship with a woman whose interest in him begins and ends with how he can abet her personal quest to find Goddard. Because he is so alone, he is vulnerable to Andrea's manipulation. His relationship with her is a substitute for human contact. At this time in his life, with his virility beginning to wane, Domostroy is captivated by Andrea's youth and beauty, as well as her nearly encyclopedic knowledge of sex. It seems doubtful that a prudent man such as Tarden would have permitted himself to be so beguiled. He would not have agreed to help a stranger stalk a reclusive rock star without a more thorough and plausible explanation than the flimsy pretext offered by Andrea. Additionally, Tarden would not have overlooked the many clues to her secret life, a world from which Domostroy is excluded until the very end of the book. Only in the final pages of *Pinball*, when she can finally stop playing the role that Domostroy expects of her, does Andrea reveal the brutal nature of

her true intentions. She has manipulated everyone in the novel, Domostroy most brilliantly of all. He never had the slightest inkling of what she was up to. It is precisely because Domostroy and Fabian are so vulnerable, lonely and desperate—at least in comparison with their predecessors—that they are so easily managed by Andrea and Alexandra. The last protagonists must fight hard in order to retain even a semblance of control. What they wish to rediscover is the powerful sense of self which once defined them.

j) Kosinski the Contrarian

Part of Kosinski's effectiveness as a writer had to do with his defiance of convention. Though he knew that critics and readers tended to see his books as sordid tales about depraved individuals, he refused to make any changes which would be untrue to his vision. What mattered most to him, as a writer, was not pleasing others, but revealing the truth of the world as he saw it and experienced it. In that sense, Kosinski remained a social scientist to the end. He was fond of saying that all anyone needed to know about him as a man could be deduced by reading his fiction. In a sense this is true: though the exact details of his life during the war, for example, will never be ascertained with definitiveness, the way he writes does reveal some basic truths about him as a person. Kosinski was a man who clearly lived by his own rules. He needed to share his vision with the world. In interviews, he always comes across as resolute, if not downright stubborn, in defending his own point of view.

> I have made [a] great number of friends and a great number of enemies. This is the price that you have to pay. If you ask me whether I care about it, I do not. I like to have friends and I like to be liked and I would rather have friends than enemies, but if the price for doing what I am doing is having very vicious enemies...fine. I have no children to worry about and so I'm going to do it exactly that way: I'm

> going to be an individual when I want to be and collective when I have to be.
>
> —Jerzy Kosinski, discussing his philosophy of life, in the documentary, "*Sex, Lies and Jerzy Kosinski*," 1994

His life was always the prime source of his fiction. And he was determined to live as he wished: to do otherwise might serve to compromise his work. That it was unusual for novelists to promote their work on television talk shows, at the time he was doing so, did not matter to Kosinski. He did not care whether other people approved of his idiosyncrasies. Even the things he chose to write about—such as an itinerant polo player—were certainly not designed to have mass appeal. When the *Village Voice* scandal broke in 1982, his friends and enemies alike were stunned that Kosinski refused to defend himself against the charges which Geoffrey Stokes and Elliot Fremont-Smith had raised. Though others, such as his friend John Corry of the *New York Times* (in a 6400 word piece in the Arts and Leisure Section, 7 November 1982) and a number of Kosinski's old publishers defended him in print, Kosinski himself did not do anything to address the controversy swirling around his life and work. According to James Park Sloan, Kosinski himself described the next few years—which he and his wife spent primarily outside New York—as an attempt to run "away from the *Village Voice*." (Sloan 1996, 393) Between 1983 and 1988, Kosinski worked and reworked *Hermit*, from "a narrative of simple anecdotes, more or less like his earlier work, into a heavily layered, elusive, evasive, richly footnoted text with a complexity that made it stand as a metaphoric representation of its author." (Sloan 1996, 405-406)

Rather than pursue a legal remedy, as his foreign publishers and most of his friends and fans might have preferred, Kosinski knew that his best hope for a satisfactory outcome did not lie with American jurisprudence. The defendants in such a case would have had free rein to introduce even more nefarious evidence, thereby further confusing fact and

fiction. Kosinski's survival instincts were still strong: more than anyone else, he seems to have appreciated the tremendous downside of a trial. By suing the *Village Voice*, he could only hope to win money: his escutcheon would remain sullied regardless of the size of the award. Such a high profile suit would only provide his enemies with an even bigger soapbox from which to pontificate upon his eccentricities and deficiencies as both a writer and a person. Also, there was a possibility that his opponents might successfully attempt to reverse the litigation process, thereby placing Kosinski in the unenviable and undignified position of having to prove that he had written his own novels. It is not clear how any writer could effectively meet this standard of proof. The risk to Kosinski was that he might forfeit control of what he valued most of all: the capacity to define himself. If he lost the case, the interpretation of his life which the defendants put forward at trial might become the officially recognized history: all anyone would ever remember about him. Kosinski desperately needed to stay in control. He could not allow the two writers from the *Village Voice*, men he barely knew, to have the last word on his life. There was also another matter: as a past President of PEN, Kosinski had stood for freedom of speech above all. Trying to muzzle the *Village Voice*, no matter how impertinent its treatment of him, was just not Kosinski's style. If all speech in the United States was truly protected—including the topics Kosinski chose to write about—then any and all articles and opinions, including those unfavourable to Kosinski, should be allowed to stand. In addition, Kosinski was a man who did not believe in absolutes: he was uncomfortable with the very notion of objective truth. As he told *The Toronto Globe and Mail*, the *Village Voice* story was "a perfectly valid expression of someone's judgment. Truth has nothing to do with it. There's no way to prove or disprove it." (Gefen 1991, 233)

By keeping his silence, Kosinski hoped to recapture the moral high ground from Stokes and Fremont-Smith, who came across as bullies, trying to detract from the success,

against great odds, of an émigré writer. Some of Stokes and Fremont-Smith's charges against Kosinski—such as the assertion that he was a CIA agent or that *The Painted Bird* had first been written in Polish—have never been taken particularly seriously by literary scholars. Nor is it clear why Kosinski's work should be considered inferior on the basis of his having embellished the actual details of his personal biography. Moreover, it should be noted here that Stokes and Fremont-Smith, never produced the second part of their article, which was supposed to follow up their original piece. To many, it must have seemed as though Kosinski did not consider Stokes and Fremont-Smith's charges important enough to even warrant an answer. As was his wont, Kosinski decided to speak through his next book. He hoped that *Hermit* might restore his reputation by creating a Kosinskian novel with a difference: this book would be so painfully personal, so clearly deriving from the mind of Jerzy Kosinski, that no one would ever dare claim that it was not entirely his.

In *Hermit*, virtually every idea is footnoted, lest Kosinski ever again be accused of plagiarism. *Hermit* also draws parallels between the *Village Voice* scandal and past literary controversies involving writers such as James Fenimore Cooper and Joseph Conrad. Kosinski needs his readers to be aware that significant writers have often led turbulent lives. If the *Village Voice* exposé captured part of the truth of Jerzy Kosinski, that he was not exactly the man he had always professed to be and that he had had editorial assistance in the production of his novels, *Hermit* contains another kind of verisimilitude—about the author and his art. In *Hermit*, as in *The Painted Bird*, Kosinski takes his readers back to a place of shame and terror, inside his head, this time as a scandalized novelist, struggling to maintain some semblance of dignity. It took great courage and determination to write *Hermit*. It is a head-on examination of a period of his life, the period just before and after 1982, about which he felt great shame. *Hermit* is thus a book about vulnerability. Kosinski allows readers to get very close to him. As strangers root through his life and

work, looking for inconsistencies and tearing apart and distorting whatever scraps of information they manage to uncover, his angst is palpable. This is what he had to live through. How much better, the reader must ask, would anyone else have fared under such thoroughly unrelenting, mean spirited and withering scrutiny? The irony of all this could not possibly have been lost on Kosinski. Exactly as his father had predicted, being noticed by and standing out from other people had backfired on him. In the end, his notoriety actually increased his feelings of isolation.

k) The Despair of the Kosinskian Man: Paying the Price of Fame

The advantages of anonymity (or invisibility, as Kosinski sometimes phrases it) are explored in *Passion Play*, *Pinball* and *Hermit*. While the protagonists of these novels toy with the notion of living unnoticed—as Goddard successfully manages to in *Pinball*—they remain obsessed with fame. They simply cannot abide mediocrity. While this theme, the nature of celebrity, was a subtext of some of Kosinski's fiction up until *Blind Date*, it grows into a major motif in the final novels, where the protagonists are obsessed with greatness and define themselves through their unique talents. In his description of Fabian, for example, Kosinski writes that "it was not he who had shaped his faultless stroke, but the faultless stroke that had shaped him." (PP, 32-33) From the moment in his youth when some village boys throw Fabian onto a stallion, he feels oddly at home astride the back of a horse. Everything that subsequently happens to him can be traced back to his extraordinary accomplishments as a player. Naturally, there are drawbacks to having exceptional abilities. First, they tend to alienate those who possess such skills from those who were not so blessed. The experience of playing with or against Fabian leaves the other players feeling inadequate. They do not want a teammate who views their shortcomings with incredulity. Second, when one's identity is so heavily invested in past success, failures can be particularly devastating. Fabian did not seem

prepared to face the day when his stroke would not be quite so faultless. Simply put, such high achievers have further to fall than others. Throughout these books, the main characters provide past evidence of their extraordinary capabilities, almost as though they feel compelled to share their résumés.

For example, in addition to his polo acumen, the reader is told that Fabian's second book received the National Horse Lovers Award. Winning this prize affords him instant gravitas within the equestrian community. He also teaches a course in the Humanities at an Ivy League university, gives testimony before a Congressional subcommittee on the matter of the Horse Protection Act, is frequently quoted in polo and equestrian magazines and enjoys relationships with some of the most powerful people on earth, including El Benefactor, the autocratic leader of the Latin American republic of Los Lemures. Domostroy is a National Music Award winner, a two term President of MUSE International, was presented with the British Academy Award for best film score, has written and recorded eight albums of classical music, appears on television talk shows, played the part of a Russian composer in a Hollywood movie, was mentioned in *Who's Who in America* and *Who's Who in the World*, was profiled in both *The Washington Post* and *New York* magazine and, like Fabian, teaches at an Ivy League college. Norbert Kosky has an equally impressive curriculum vitae: he has written eight novels, portrayed Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin in Beau Brummel's *Total State*, presented the Oscar for best writing, was twice elected to the presidency of W.E.T. (the Writers, Editors and Translators Association), also appears on television, was instrumental in having a dissident writer released from detention, socializes with the ex-Secretary of State, the ex-National Security Advisor and a Ruthenian Cardinal who is later elected Pope.

As their unique gifts begin to erode, their lives are thrown into chaos. Soon, even the people around them—including former supporters—lose faith. The protagonists begin to

doubt themselves, and must labour to prove that they are still men of substance. Not surprisingly, this does not seem to fool anyone. As Stella remarks after Fabian injures himself trying to impress Vanessa, "The night is [young]. You are not." (PP, 211) Hurrying from one crisis to another, they cannot manage to recapture what has been lost. Instead, they look for ways of confirming their former greatness. Fabian and Kosky, for example, visit bookstores to see for themselves if their work is still in print and—if so—how it is selling. These are tired men, who once had a zest for living, but who are now past their prime. As their talents erode, they cannot help noticing the different way in which they are perceived. When Kosky (in disguise) approaches a bookstore manager to inquire why none of his books are on the shelves, the man answers that Kosky is "finished, not just sold out." (Hermit, 406) By this the man explains that Kosky is dead as a significant creative force. He adds that the best place to look for Kosky's novels "is at the literary cemetery." (Hermit, 406) Similarly, in *Pinball*, Domostroy's compositions, once greeted enthusiastically, are now dismissed as irrelevant. One reviewer even predicts that rather than continue to promulgate such a relentlessly cheerless worldview, Domostroy might instead wish to take his own life. (Pinball, 11) In the revised version of *Pinball* (1983), Kosinski includes a new line of dialogue in which Andrea recounts an unfortunate incident from Domostroy's life, whereby a "radical scandal sheet" attacked his reputation by alleging that he had not written all his own music. (Pinball 1983, 19) The damage done to Domostroy's reputation is catastrophic.

This sort of merciless excoriation of the protagonists and their work is extended even further in *Hermit* where Norbert Kosky is never able to mollify his critics. At one point, Kosky ruefully watches his life and work being discussed by a group of literary insiders, including his old editor, on a television program called "Controversy!," a McLaughlin Group-style round table discussion of literature. Ironically, the program usually celebrates the work of dead authors—but in this case the producers make an exception.

Though Kosky is still alive, two of the panelists clearly consider his work a dead issue, with the host facetiously predicting that their discussion may well serve the purpose of burying Kosky alive. (Hermit, 443) Just like Domostroy, critics once considered Kosky's work to be innovative: now it is seen as stale. The panelists on "Controversy!" tend to be callous and unrelenting in their criticism—"are we doing a program or a pogrom?"—his editor jokingly inquires at one point. (Hermit, 448) "I find him (Kosky) as gross as his characters," says the female panelist. (Hermit, 450) To her, Kosky is a shameless, prevaricating self-promoter whose work is nothing more than a particularly tiresome montage of rape and hate. (Hermit, 450) The conclusion is that his work does not have any place in the pantheon of great writers in exile or novelists in English. In addition, Kosky's odd working habits, unconventional personal lifestyle, love of polo and swimming (or more correctly 'floating') and his frequent appearances in the mass media as well as his prominent role in a Beau Brummel production, come under scrutiny. Two of the panelists see Kosky as suffering from terminal overexposure.

Throughout *Hermit*, Kosky continually expresses frustration with his critics' inability to impartially review his fiction as fiction, that is entirely on its merits, without reference to their personal presumptions and judgments about his private life. They seem incapable of resisting the impulse to search for elements in his fiction which prove their supposition: that everything written by Kosky is just an elaborately reworked version of his actual life. Later on in *Hermit*, once Kosky's own novel, *The Healer*, is released, a critic notes that its unconventional format—all quotes and digressions and ruminations on the nature of composition, without much in the way of a plot—is a natural progression for "a fiction writer who made a career of putting too much fiction into his life, but not enough life into his fiction." (Hermit, 500) Kosky has heard this all before and likes to answer such criticism with a similarly structured aphorism, couched in the Kosinskian word play which is so much a part of the playful atmosphere of *Hermit*: "A novel is to be read for

its characters, not for the character of the man or woman who wrote it." (Hermit, 406) As Kosky's literary executor (within the fictional world of this novel), Kosinski includes a footnote about how reviewers of Kosky's first book made the mistake of reviewing the veracity and plausibility of Kosky's childhood rather than the relative merits of the novel itself. (Hermit, 439)

As for the panelists on the television program, they cannot even agree on the precise amount of scorn that they wish to heap on Kosky's work. When the host tries to dismiss his fiction as nothing more than a "literary douche," one of the other guests argues that this is too high a praise for such a limited talent as Kosky. (Hermit, 451) The notion that his work could have any medicinal or cleansing value to the reader distorts the disdain with which the hosts of the program view Kosky's fiction. Too late, the Kosinskian men learn that there is no way to detach the salacious details of their personal lives from the public discourse. People believe what they read and hear about these protagonists. In *Pinball*, there is an episode where a music student plagiarizes *Octaves* and then submits it, under an assumed name, to a number of major music publishers, including Etude Classics, Domostroy's actual publisher. All the companies reject *Octaves*, condemning it as "chilly, episodic, something less than a satisfying whole." (Pinball, 173) Domostroy's detractors immediately point to this fiasco as proof that his work is vastly overrated. Domostroy encounters this sort of reaction a number of times in *Pinball*, where strangers think they know him and thus prejudge him on the basis of what they think he might be like. His reputation precedes him. This is the burden of celebrity. Rumours and fact can become intermingled. Over time, the reputations of the Kosinskian protagonists overwhelm their actual identities. They are forced to live up to roles that have been assigned to them, rather than selected by them. For example, the stories of Fabian's atypical early life, wandering alone through the midst of the war, take on a life of their own, as they becomes distorted and twisted, reemerging as myth. By the time that Fabian

is buttonholed by Stanhope functionary, Michael Stockey, to host a made for television polo event, Fabian's reputation (whether earned or not) has come to define him.

> "There's a story." Stockey coughed nervously, then went on. "They say you learned those trick shots as a kid, during the War in Europe, when you were forced to work on a horse in some peasant bullring, that you belong in a circus, not on a polo field. They don't even want you as an umpire or a referee." (PP, 53)

The exchange with Stockey is particularly telling. Fabian does not even bother to try to correct Stockey. He knows that whatever explanation he provides, it will most likely be twisted to conform with the crazy rumours that people have already heard about him. It is significant then that in all three novels, the protagonists come into close contact with people who are more familiar with the (often incorrect) details of their personal lives than with their work. In *Hermit*, a woman from North Carolina approaches the protagonist and remarks:

> You must be Norbert Kosky, the guy who floats like nobody but won't swim like everbody. [sic] Am I right? Saw you handing out Oscars. Saw you in *Total State*, but read nothing by you. Only about you. (Hermit, 356)

Short of disavowing his craft and dropping out entirely, as Domostroy does (though much too late to make any difference in his life)—there seems no obvious way to completely reclaim one's own identity from the popular culture. The only character in these books who is effectively able to retain control of his true self is Osten. He seems to have an instinctive appreciation of the crushing weight of celebrity. His creation of the Goddard persona as a protective shield is prescient insofar as it allows him to circumvent the unpleasant parts of being the most influential musician of his generation. In essence, he detaches his life from his art. Conversely, Domostroy, Fabian and Kosky feel

restricted by their notoriety. They remain cognizant that others are affected by the things they say, do and write. Domostroy, for example, is shocked when a young fan he encountered just once (and whom, at first, he does not recall meeting) makes him the chief beneficiary of her modest estate. The notoriety of the final Kosinskian men makes everything in their lives harder, including excelling at what they do best. With the benefit of hindsight, Domostroy realizes that his failure to create boundaries between his music and his personal life (early in his musical career) was a serious blunder. He shortsightedly allowed others to define him. He realizes that surrogates should never determine a matter of such gravity. In the end, Domostroy's overexposure, together with his excessive candour about his personal life, leaves his critics free to comment with impunity on everything he does, often in particularly nasty terms.

In *Pinball*, Goddard is put forward as the ideal fusion of talent and circumspection. Because his identity is unknown, "he is famous not as a presence but as an absence." (Everman 1991, 139) While living the life of Jimmy Osten, graduate student at the University of California at Davis, his alter ego remains safe. Osten does not need to hide in the walls of his apartment. He hides within himself. The ubiquitous Goddard sound is itself a disguise. The unassuming Osten is such an unlikely candidate to single-handedly produce a worldwide cultural phenomenon that no one would ever guess he was an elusive rock icon. The Goddard success story is Domostroy's life turned inside out: while the latter lives an anonymous, yet visible life, the former is famous yet invisible. (Everman 1991, 139) Osten's success as an artist is linked directly to his anonymity. Like Chance in *Being There*, he is a blank canvas. People are free to discover whatever they wish in Goddard's music. He never disappoints. Goddard can be whatever—and whoever—you wish him to be. (Everman 1991, 145)

l) Kosinski: Brilliant Manipulator

In the last part of his life, Kosinski grew even more interested in the relationship between fame and privacy. John Lennon's assassination, outside his Manhattan apartment in 1980, was an important subtext here. As a prominent New Yorker himself, Kosinski had occasionally experienced first hand the dangerous consequences of notoriety. No doubt Kosinski felt that his reputation had been butchered by the two *Village Voice* writers. In *New York* magazine, it was reported that Kosinski had told a friend, "People never say 'You're Kosinski, the author of *The Painted Bird*,' anymore. Now they say, 'Kosinski aren't you involved in some scandal about perjury or plagiarism?'" (Taylor 1991, 32-33) In his last interview, Kosinski recounts a fan seeing him on the street and saying, "Kosinski, I love your books and I don't care who wrote them." (Gefen 1991, 234) People could not seem to forget the *Village Voice* article. The scandal, in one form or another, dominated the remainder of his life. Everything that happened to him after 1982, including his 1991 suicide, was attributed to it. In the years that followed the scandal, all of his most bizarre personal habits became part of the public domain, further sullying his esteem within the literary community.[12]

In the course of a lifetime, any man or woman endures a number of humiliations, but Kosinski was already such a high profile personality, and surrounded himself with such eminent friends, that everything about him tended to be larger than life. After the publication of the *Village Voice* piece, for example, *Vanity Fair* estimated that "Worldwide, over six hundred articles pondered Kosinski and his veracity." (Schiff 1988, 117) Kosinski's world was collapsing all around him. For a man who was ambivalent about fame, and did not trust easily, this humiliation, before the entire world, must have

[12]For more information, please refer to Jerome Klinkowitz's "Betrayed by Jerzy Kosinski" in *The Missouri Review* (Summer 1983).

been incredibly painful. John Taylor postulates that "because he had been persecuted as a child, he developed a persecution complex, and because of this complex, he cultivated secrecy. But his secrecy lent him an aura of mystery, which aroused the suspicions of others, and because of their suspicions, he was persecuted once again." (Taylor 1991, 29) The trajectory of his life was circular, inexorably leading him back to where he started. Once more, he was the solitary figure, detached and displaced, battling alone against the oppressive collectivity. Over the years, Kosinski had intentionally manufactured an image of himself as a witty, urbane novelist. He had packaged himself so carefully that the *Washington Post*, early in his career, noted that "he himself is the medium in which he works..." (Allen 1971, B6) After struggling so hard to cultivate this public persona, it must have been very difficult to see his public image being transformed beyond recognition. He had been so thoroughly vilified and discredited that his fame became a burden.

In his life up to 1982, everything Kosinski had done was to enhance his range of experience, to make him a better writer. He seemed to be of the opinion that if he marketed his life to the American public as though it were a product, then they would be more inclined to buy into his world. This approach was based on an implicit trust between Kosinski and his readers, that he was using his books to share an extraordinarily unusual lifetime of experiences. This plan, selling himself to the public, could only work if he was perceived to be honest and forthright. No reader wishes to be manipulated by the author. All was lost once the public began to question Kosinski's veracity. By so flagrantly "smudging the borders between his biography and his storytelling," Kosinski had entered dangerous territory. (Schiff 1988, 116) The questions were inevitable. How much of his fiction was directly based on his personal experiences? Was he really a child survivor? Was his résumé an outright lie? Critics and journalists are an especially tough lot and the argument that "there was no absolute truth" and "memory and observation

were selective and subjective" was not going to fly with them. (Taylor 1991, 27) In that sense, Stokes and Fremont-Smith's article was not a revelation. It merely fleshed out existing rumours that had been floating around for years. Stokes and Fremont-Smith had approached their subject strictly as reporters, trying to get to the bottom of who Jerzy Kosinski was. This was not the most effective approach, since Kosinski's story was not news in the traditional sense, but a story about "an artist's search for method." (Schiff 1988, 167)

By all accounts, Kosinski knew only too well how he was perceived:

> "Some think I'm manipulative and self-centered. They think I'm perverse. There are people who simply would not sit beside me at dinner. They have read my fiction, and it has made them uneasy." (Base 1982, G10)

His personal statements only enhanced this view. James Park Sloan reports that Kosinski liked to change "his friends every two years," since this would give him a new audience for all his favourite pranks and anecdotes. (Sloan 1996, 342) Even his friend, author William Styron, summed up Kosinski's life by saying, "He was a very charming guy but, and I say this affectionately, there was a bit of a con man about him." (Kroll 1991, 72) It seems as though Kosinski wanted people to remain confused about his life story, especially the early part, which is supposedly the subject of *The Painted Bird.* John Corry recounts, "If you said his works were novels, he would say they were true. If you said they were true, he'd say they were fiction." (Taylor 1991, 27) At some point, it is possible that Kosinski himself could no longer distinguish between what he had claimed was true and what had actually happened. In his last interview, just days before his suicide, Kosinski was asked one last time whether *The Painted Bird* was autobiographical. Consistent to the end, he answered, "I don't want to say, even to myself. That ambiguity is what fiction is all about." (Gefen 1991, 232) Kosinski would not give this answer if he

did not want the confusion surrounding his life to continue.[13] The things he said and wrote seem specifically designed to mystify, infuriate and frustrate readers and critics alike. In Yiddish, the best way to describe such a person, who refuses to give a straight answer, is a 'moishe kapoyr' (pronounced moy-sheh ka-poyr) or contrarian—a person who insists on doing and saying the opposite of what is expected.[14] In Kosinski's work, this ambiguity—about whether or not he is writing about himself—is an important subtext which he utilizes to create tension and enhance the fiction's verisimilitude.

His remonstrations about the unfairness of reviewers conflating his protagonists with him rings somewhat hollow. After all, he had predicated his career on daring the reader to guess how much of him was inside each protagonist. Over time, Kosinski became so adept at straddling the line between fiction and biography that readers would sometimes write to him to voice their displeasure over something one of his protagonists had done. (Abrams 1984, 214) Some of Kosinski's critics made the same error, confusing the man's life with his work. It is ironic then, that Kosinski's final novel was inspired, at least in part, by the *Village Voice* article.[15] As the scandal developed, Kosinski saw himself as "being used in someone else's fiction." (Schiff 1988, 117) This is significant because he describes the experience of living under totalitarianism in similar terms, as being

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[13] After his suicide, it was interesting to note the number of factual errors that appeared in his obituaries in various daily newspapers. *The London Independent*, for example, wrote that Kosinski had received his Ph.D. (a degree he never managed to complete) from Columbia in 1965 and *The Jerusalem Post* reported a number of incidents in *The Painted Bird*, including the incident with Garbos and Judas, as though they were established fact, rather than vignettes from a novel.

[14] A classic example of this behavior occurred during a 1987 television interview, when the interviewer, Mike Leiderman, mentioned that Kosinski's books contain a lot of sex. Kosinski's immediate response was "Not enough." (Leiderman 1987, 217)

[15] Though he denied this in his final interview (Gefen 1991, 233), it seems likely that Kosinski was merely engaging in his habitual misdirection. Kosinski's argument, that *Hermit* is about the creative process as a whole, is part of the truth, but is not the whole story. Arguing that it is not a voluminous answer to the *Village Voice* article is at least as disingenuous as Kosinski's claim, at certain points during his life (and mentioned in his obituary in *Newsweek)*, that he did not "want to be remembered." (Kroll 1991, 72) It seems unlikely that anyone would expend so many years crafting and then revising their work, if they truly wished to be forgotten. Kosinski knew full well that his fiction, especially *The Painted Bird*, would continue to be read after his death. If it is true, as Kosinski often argued, that he was present in his fiction (inasmuch as each reader could know him by reading his books), he would live again every time a new reader opened one of his novels.

"imprisoned in a large house of political fiction, persecuted by a mad best-selling novelist, Stalin..." (Klinkowitz 1973, 56) In attempting to recapture control of his own identity, Kosinski took the final step and created a book in which the protagonist, a worn out old man, bears far more than a passing resemblance to Kosinski himself. In many ways they are interchangeable. Indeed, after the release of *Hermit*, Kosinski promoted his new book in much the same way that Norbert Kosky plugs his own book, *The Healer*. According to Kosinski, *Hermit* was a self-contained unit. "'You don't need any other book but this. You may not want to read any other books from now on, because this book gives you basically insight to the whole genre.'" (Schiff 1988, 117) Norbert Kosky's description of *The Healer's* footnotes as being "worth the price of literary admission" is similarly hyperbolic. (Hermit, 227) The next section will undertake a rigorous examination of *Hermit*, for the purpose of better understanding the uniqueness of Kosinski's autofictional approach.

SECTION III - AUTOFICTION AS DENOUEMENT: PENETRATING THE LABYRINTH OF *THE HERMIT OF 69TH STREET*

a) Autofiction: A New Departure

In Jerzy Kosinski's 1986 photo essay in *Esquire* magazine, "Death in Cannes," in which he recalls his final visit with his friend, Jacques Monod, there are rhetorical questions periodically highlighted throughout the text. Two of the questions are quite significant. In the first, Kosinski asks (and then proceeds to answer) what the reader is already wondering: "**...since you use pictures, is this piece nonfiction?**"[16] (Death in Cannes, 82) In the second, Kosinski again poses the question: "**Are you, in this piece, quoting Monod verbatim? Are these Monod's very words?**" (Death in Cannes, 86) Kosinski's

[16]Bold type by Kosinski.

response to both questions is similarly cryptic. He is adamant that what he has created is neither entirely fiction nor wholly memoir. It is autofiction, the place where fiction, biography, memory and history blend together. The supposition here is that all writing derives from memory. Since no two people's memories are ever identical (and that all memory is flawed in any case), nonfiction—including biography—will tend to have elements of fiction embedded within it. (Sherwin 1981, 24) Autofiction emancipates the author. It allows him to move back and forth between different genres as need be. The author is thus granted something approaching total artistic autonomy. "Death in Cannes" is the first time that Kosinski uses the term autofiction (at least in writing), but he always had an abiding interest in creating uncertainty as to the origins of his fiction. Some of Kosinski the man inevitably showed up in his fictional creations, to be sure, but the question was how much. As Pearl Sheffy Gefen said, "Kosinski delighted in dropping clues to his own identity throughout his novels." (Gefen 1991, 232) But he would never provide anything more substantive than little teases, perhaps to keep the question foremost in his readers' minds.

Because he was a man who had always been reticent to categorize his own work (in the end, leaving it up to critics and biographers), it seems possible that Kosinski had been mulling the idea of autofiction long before he wrote "Death at Cannes." Between the publication of Kosinski's 1965 *Notes of the Author* and his last interview with Pearl Sheffy Gefen in 1991, he continuously grappled with how to answer the question of how much of his fiction came directly from his own experience. In the end, what mattered most to him was keeping everyone guessing. Just as it is a tradition to repeat the four questions every Passover, so it is the reader's destiny to eternally ponder such questions as how much of the boy in *The Painted Bird* was actually Kosinski as a child. Kosinski was reluctant to definitively resolve this issue because he knew that these recurrent questions were part of his allure as an author. For some, not knowing whether they were

reading fiction or biography made the work just that much more compelling. Answering these questions to everyone else's satisfaction would not enhance—and would probably detract from—the reader's appreciation of his work. Kosinski did everything he could to cloud the issue. His favourite trick was to tell interviewers the opposite of what he felt they expected. For example, if someone asked whether *The Painted Bird* was a memoir, he would immediately claim that it was a novel. Conversely, if the interviewer treated the book as fiction, he would state that everything in it was true—that all the incidents had not happened to him personally, but they had indeed occurred. This guaranteed that no one could ever trust his answers, since each interview was now contradicted by those preceding it. It was the same as if he had declined to answer in the first place. Sometimes he would equivocate on the matter, as he did in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1984, saying only "There's nothing in my novels that isn't derivative (of my life) in some way." (Abrams 1984, 213)

At the time of the scandal, as he was working on *Hermit*, autofiction begins to look more and more attractive to Kosinski, the answer to his prayers, in many ways. The *Village Voice* had accused him of cheating his readers and debasing literary tradition. (Stokes & Fremont-Smith 1982, 41) His response was to move in a new direction with his work. This was the perfect opportunity to put theory into practice, to show that he was indeed the creator of his own work. And he set about this task in the most unusual way possible: if the main charge against him was that he had borrowed the ideas of other writers without acknowledgment, Kosinski would create a new type of book which would painstakingly document each instance in which he explored ideas previously examined by others. He would vindicate himself of the *Village Voice* charges by showing that every author was beholden to the writers who had come before him. By way of illustration, Kosinski sarcastically argues that Hannah Arendt's conception of the 'banality of evil' was an idea that she shoplifted directly from his countryman, Joseph Conrad. (Hermit, 376) The idea

seems to be that if it is permissible for an eminent thinker such as Hannah Arendt to write about concepts which others had previously explored, it should also be permissible for Kosinski.

Hermit becomes the physical embodiment of Kosinski's wish to fly free as a writer, unconstrained by previous traditions. *Hermit* would eventually grow from a traditional novel into Kosinski's magnum opus. Neither entirely fiction nor autobiography, it would mix together storytelling, academic analysis, history and folklore to create a metafictional 'mega-novel.' (Hermit, 433) Inside this fortress of imagination, Kosinski could finally be at ease—even if his readers would not. The experience of reading *Hermit* is entirely unique. As Larry McCaffery writes in his review of *Hermit*, a plot summary of this book is not only worthless, but would distort "the actual experience of reading" the book. (McCaffery 1988, 9) Instead, it is more useful to describe what the reader might see and feel while reading it. First, it is important to note that *Hermit* combines a number of classic characteristics of the postmodern novel: discontinuity, disorder and dislocation, and fuses them into Kosinski's already established writing style, to create a shifting discourse with the reader. It raises questions just as often as it answers them, it plays word games, ruminates openly about politics, literature and history, gossips about the rich and famous, provides tantalizing clues to Kosinski's identity, decries the patent unfairness of the critics' attacks on his life and work, provides historical precursors to his current situation and quotes from hundreds of disparate sources (from the *Boy Scout Manual*, to Anaïs Nin, to *The Best of Big Boobs* magazine, to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*) in order to create a kind of intertextual reading room. *Hermit* was conceived as a deliberate act of defiance. It attempts to create a new form of writing. Through the audacious employment of quotations, references and asides, it seeks to overwhelm critics by creating something they had not previously encountered. On another level, *Hermit* is a homage to those thinkers who most influenced Kosinski. Inside, *Hermit* is a leisurely,

nearly glacial place, where there is time (and especially space) to discuss any topic under the sun—especially the life history of Jerzy Kosinski. No tangent is too bizarre to pursue and no sub-reference too obscure to reproduce, often in its entirety.

b) The Experience of Reading *Hermit*

> "You think I no speaka the English? Just listen to these wordplays, these glorious tropes, these waves of Nabokovian persiflage. English is mine!" (Schiff 1988, 169)
>
> —Kosinski, in *Vanity Fair*, waxing enthusiastic about the publication of *Hermit*

As was previously discussed, *The Hermit of 69th Street* was not originally designed to be the long and abstruse book into which it ultimately grew. (Sloan 1996, 405-406) Its style of deliberate discontinuity—through the overuse of bibliographical citations, tedious internal monologues, extensive footnoting, and inane word play—evolved out of necessity. It was a response to events. The truth is that no one will ever know for certain what it was supposed to be. All that anyone can be sure about is what it eventually grew into: to some, an unreadable monstrosity, to others, a guided tour through the eclectic imagination of Jerzy Kosinski, a place where his fans might consort with him, at least for a little while. What is certain is that in the aftermath of the *Village Voice* scandal, Kosinski's credibility as a writer was at its absolutely lowest point. He felt that he had to demonstrate that he was indeed the author of all his previous work. The *Washington Post* called *Hermit* "a defiant, highly personalized literary response to the charges leveled against him." (McCaffery 1988, 1) The book eventually came to encompass all that readers could ever hope to know about Kosinski, including the correct pronunciation of his first name—actually "Yerzhe Kosheen-skyii." (Hermit, 305) *Hermit* is the place where memoir and history morph into metafiction, as Kosinski makes his "stab at a

postmodern novel." (Richwine 1988, 646) Inside Norbert Kosky's working papers, there is an approximation of Kosinski's stream of consciousness, a disjointed, dreamlike place where the author puts himself through fantastic mental contortions in order to produce (what never becomes more than) the framework of a Kosinski-type novel.

In *Hermit*, the reader is disabused of the notion that writing is easy. Kosinski shows the preparation of a novel as an onerous process of false starts, dead ends and massive rewrites. Moreover, there are cantankerous editors, argumentative proofreaders, intrusive fans and a seemingly inexhaustible supply of critics waiting to tear his work apart. Because it is an experimental work, *Hermit* does not read like any of Kosinski's previous novels; nevertheless, it is still strongly Kosinskian in its subject matter—alienation, victimization, concealment and so forth remain its core themes. It also borrows heavily from Kosinski's personal experiences, far more than any of his previous work. When he wrote this book, Kosinski was clearly aching for new ways to express himself:

> The idea was that I felt that the traditional novel, the kind of a traditional novel I wrote until then—with plot, whether broken or not, nevertheless truly fictional—ran out on me. I had nothing more to say in that. Eight novels, enough. (Leiderman 1987, 217)
>
> —Kosinski, in a 1987 interview, discussing *Hermit*, then a work in progress

For the reader, *Hermit* can be either an excrutiating or rewarding experience, depending upon one's approach to the book. Kosinski himself conceded this, arguing that although *Hermit* was his "most imaginative novel"—loads of fun to research and write—it was not particularly readable. (Schiff 1988, 117) At this late stage in his career, Kosinski wished to investigate new ways of communicating with his readers. Kosinski argued that "Literary works shouldn't be measured by the facility by which, like TV dinners, they can

be digested." (Adachi [1] 1988, C3) He knew that *Hermit* would be reviled by critics, but at least they would not be indifferent to it—as they had been to *Passion Play* and *Pinball.* And even if they found the book exasperating and its author self-involved, they would still have to acknowledge his originality in creating a completely unique form by which to expatiate his views. To extend Kosinski's food analogy, *Hermit* was a brand new recipe. No one had previously seen or tasted a dish quite like it. But as with all gourmet cooking, it was an acquired taste which was too rich for some and too piquant for others. It was not something one would wish to consume all the time, but it could be a refreshing break from conventionally written fare.

Kosinski's approach to his book was relatively simple. He enhanced (or hindered, depending on your perspective) the text of *Hermit* by quoting passages and borrowing concepts and scraps of material from hundreds of sources (including his own books, articles and speeches). Kosinski wished to illustrate that nothing is truly original, that in one form or another, every writer owes something to the authors who came before him—in a sense, even to himself. Borrowing thus goes hand in hand with composition. The technique Kosinski utilizes in *Hermit* amounts to literary sampling. In *Hermit,* Kosky admonishes another character not to think of his new book, *The Healer*, as fiction, but rather as "a new type of a Literary Party." (Hermit, 227) The meaning of 'Party' here is deliberately vague. Whether he refers to a political alliance or a social gathering is unclear, but the point is well made in either case. Some parties are better and thus more memorable than others. Kosinski wants his readers to have fun at (or in) his party, but in order to do so, they must first understand his house rules. First, *Hermit* cannot be fully appreciated and is in fact incomprehensible, "without an in-depth knowledge" of Kosinski's life. (Schiff 1988, 169) In that sense, *Hermit* successfully achieves its basic aim of being an elaborate inside joke (or perhaps dysfunctional valentine) for readers of his prior work. It attempts to open up the creative process, revealing what he must do to

write a book. Second, *Hermit* is heavily dependent on the indulgence of its readers in order to make sense of it. In other words, one's enjoyment of it varies in proportion with what one brings to the table. For those interested in matters of epistemology, for example, *Hermit* functions as an oversized overview of 20th century literature. It is a book in which he permits himself to take risks. By placing all his vulnerabilities on display, Kosinski seeks to draw his readers out, forcing them to utilize their imaginations in order to follow (what little there is) of the story. In essence, Kosinski is inviting the readers out to play, to have some fun with him. It is up to each individual to determine the wisdom of following Kosinski's lead.

Hermit is not an effortless read: it exasperates most readers, who tend not to get past the first few pages. Over and over, Kosinski deliberately violates any expectation of a coherent plot. As Phoebe-Lou Adams states in *The Atlantic*, "the book is rewarding as a revelation of what a novelist usually, and mercifully, carries in his head but omits from his fiction." (Adams 1988, 88) Still, reading *Hermit* can be a most rewarding and satisfying experience—in terms of knowing Kosinski better and putting his other work into its proper context—if you can somehow get through it. The trip inside Kosinski's imagination is troubling, but it is an absolutely essential element of *Hermit*. The *Village Voice* scandal devastated his life. In order to refute what had been written about him, Kosinski attempted to make his process transparent, to open up his technique to public scrutiny. By revealing the precise manner by which his novels were created, he hoped to expose the lunacy of Stokes and Fremont-Smith's thesis: that he, as a novelist, should be publicly chastised for making things up. *Hermit* is a powerfully intimate book, which seeks nothing less than to demonstrate what it was like to be Jerzy Kosinski in the aftermath of the scandal. Action is secondary in *Hermit*. Instead, the journey is into the human imagination. The majority of the book consists of soul-searching about various

issues, from the murky relationship between memory and truth, to the precarious place of the writer in exile.

c) *Hermit*: An Overview

> "Six hours would do to read *The Healer*," says Kosky. "Three hours to read it as fiction, and three as nonfiction. Add six minutes for those who in addition to reading it would want to reflect on the narrative nature of both."
> (Hermit, 359)
>
> —Kosky explaining the unique construction of his new novel, *The Healer*

Because it has such a considerable mandate to fulfill, Kosinski's last work eventually becomes quite unwieldy. According to Thomas Gladsky, *Hermit* is an example of a novel written in the documentary mode: it relies as much on bibliographical citations as on traditional narrative in order to tell its story. (Gladsky 1999, 378) *Hermit* is a curious amalgam of historiographic representation, intertextual exploration and self-reflexive analysis. These three elements, working together, create a very unusual experience for the reader. It is so radical a departure for Kosinski that the reader is compelled to reassess his previous work, as well as any preconceived notions about plot and structure. Typically, by the time a reader first sees a novel, it is a finished product: not so here. In *Hermit*, the author is shown in the act of composition, struggling to transform his thoughts and experiences and fantasies into something worthwhile for his readers. Certain sections, such as Kosky's misadventures as a presenter at the Academy Awards, create the illusion of being deep inside his mind, very nearly watching him from the inside out. His nervousness at appearing in front of hundreds of millions of people is readily apparent throughout this section, as he suffers an inopportune attack of nerves. This is one of Kosinski's most comical scenes. Unlike Chance's appearance on *This Evening*, Norbert

Kosky is self-conscious in front of the television cameras. And his neuroses are all on prominent display as he pictures different variations of the next day's news headlines: "OSCAR PRESENTER FAILS TO PRESENT—NORBERT KOSKY CHICKENS OUT"[17] (Hermit, 162) and "OSCAR PRESENTER FALLS ON STAGE, ALLEGEDLY UPSET BY THE CHOICE OF THE NOMINEE." (Hermit, 165)

Not everything in *Hermit* functions as effectively as the aforementioned section, but this is not the result of laxity. When it came to *Hermit*, Kosinski was anything but careless. Indeed, he took longer to write it than any of his previous books. Though replicating human thought and emotion on the printed page is a laborious task, it is clear from his earlier work that Kosinski was highly adept at producing polished and lean prose, with vividly drawn characters. In *Hermit*, however, Kosinski is trying something new. This book is not a showcase for his talent as a writer: years before, *The Painted Bird* and *Steps* had already made his reputation. Indeed, the *Village Voice* article had not suggested that Kosinski was devoid of talent, but rather that his fiction was a masterful manipulation of the work of other people. Writing another conventional novel would not challenge this perception—of Kosinski as a usurper. Kosinski wished to address the main points raised by the controversial article, so he directed his attention away from narrative and onto process, since this was the main question that Stokes and Fremont-Smith raised about his writing—that his work was not his own. *Hermit* takes the reader—or as Tom Butler puts it in *The Louisville Courier-Journal*, "drags the reader"—through the first part of the complex and exhausting process by which raw ideas are gradually transformed into novels. (Butler 1988, I9)

Hermit seeks to place Kosinski and his work into a larger context. The book functions both as an overview of his personal life during a given period, as well as an admission of

[17]Caps by Kosinski.

the close relationship between his fiction and that of other writers. Kosinski is not ashamed of this linkage. On the contrary, his last book is a veritable celebration of Linda Hutcheon's notion that "No text is without its intertexts." (Hutcheon 1988, vii) Here, Kosinski does not hide anything from his readers. *Hermit* shows that he is first and foremost a student of both literature and history—and it is from this solid foundation that his art emanates. Contrary to what the *Village Voice* had alleged, Kosinski was indeed aware of the traditions of his chosen profession. Kosinski wished to dramatically illustrate the point "that all artists have contexts and rely on sources, whether acknowledged or not." (Lupack 1988, 261)

After reading *Hermit*, it becomes clear that Kosinski's personal history is inexorably interwoven with many of the important events of the twentieth century. And just as his earlier prose was most effective when he encouraged the reader to believe that he was writing about himself (and not a fictional protagonist), so *Hermit* is at its best when Kosinski is floating above the text, his 'inner author' engaged in a "sustained, hyperfrenetic dialogue with history." (Gladsky 1999, 276) In autofiction, history and literature become the tools of the author. They do not belong to anyone in particular, so Kosinski feels free to jump about and explore them at his leisure. As one of the other characters remarks in *Hermit*, "A novelist can no more usurp folklore than a weatherman can usurp a storm." (Hermit, 452) Kosinski is shameless in his employment of sources. Nothing is off limits. The point here is that the number of citations in the book does not make it any less Kosinski's creation. (Schiff 1988, 169) Indeed, the way in which he deploys his references and quotations, on virtually every page of *Hermit,* is itself an act of creativity.

Kosinski's autofiction blends together disparate references and fictional episodes for the purpose of making each reader question the notion of objective meaning. *Hermit* is a portrait of both a man's personal history, as well as the historical events through which he

lives. Both these histories together define a man. It is important to be clear. *Hermit* is not Kosinski's autobiography, but it could be seen as the canvas on which he paints his self-portrait. Many of the incidents and mishaps that are recorded in *Hermit* are clearly events borrowed from Kosinski's own experience. As Thomas Gladsky remarks, *Hermit* is Kosinski's attempt to create "a history of all that might be called Jerzy Kosinski." (Gladsky 1999, 277) This is the essence of autofiction. Long before *Hermit*, Kosinski had rejected even the possibility of objective truth. *Hermit* glides easily back and forth between biography and fiction. For example, in his later years Kosinski found yoga and floating in swimming pools especially helpful to his mental and physical well being. He went so far as to demonstrate his floating technique on NBC's *Today Show* in 1984. (Sloan 1996, 403) In *Hermit*, floating becomes a trope for how a novelist works.[18] Kosky's inner buoyancy describes both his prose and his favoured manner of relaxation. (Hermit, 326) Throughout *Hermit*, Kosky floats along and above events, never really being affected by them—until the moment that he becomes embroiled in a scandal that devastates his reputation. Two writers for the *Courier* newspaper, a relatively unimportant New York publication, allege that Kosky had misrepresented his talent for floating, that his inner buoyancy is a fraud. Dialoging with himself, as he so often does, Kosky opines that the *Courier* writers "have written a fiction about your public you...." (Hermit, 326) Utilizing rumours and hearsay, the *Courier* has created a new identity, one that Kosky does not recognize. It is a fiction, in every sense of the word, and he spends the rest of the novel trying unsuccessfully to prove that he really was the man he had originally professed to be.

Hermit takes the reader to the heart of Kosinski's pain, living on in the aftermath of the scandal. Watching Kosky's "inner drama," play out (Hermit, 379), it seems fairly clear

[18]"Whether auto or not," writes Kosinski, "fiction is a vessel that floats on a natural suspension of make-believe." (Hermit, 427)

that Kosinski is attempting to set the record straight with regard to his reputation as a writer. In his review in the *Washington Post*, Larry McCaffery argues that *Hermit* appears to have been "written by Kosinski for himself." (McCaffery 1988, 9) There are references to all his previous work, both fiction and nonfiction, quotes from his characters and footnotes referring to his speeches and interviews. *Hermit* functions as a critical overview of his work: a place where he may pause and take stock of his life and fiction. *Hermit* leaves no doubt that Kosinski was familiar with his public image: at times the book serves as a kind of wink and nod to the reader.[19] With the release of the *Village Voice* article, Kosinski seemed to instantly grasp that this crisis was not about to blow over any time soon. The aspersions cast upon him, in all likelihood, would never be forgotten. Taking the reader through Kosky's trials and tribulations is Kosinski's way of illustrating what his own life was like during this period. In *Hermit*, the scandal transforms the protagonist's life so profoundly that the public soon views everything he does and says with incredulity. It eventually becomes so bad that he is approached by a polygraph manufacturer to appear in a television promotion. *Hermit* is thus Kosinski's response to the notion that he was a liar and a plagiarizer. His autofiction was a safe haven, a place between (or perhaps beyond) fact and fiction, where he would not be continually harassed and second-guessed by his critics.

In a narrow sense, *Hermit* helped Kosinski change the tone of the debate surrounding the origins of his work. The protagonist of his last book is a man in anguish over the way in which he has been misrepresented. This enhances the reader's appreciation of Kosinski's own predicament, as a man who felt that he had been done a terrible disservice. Instead of directly answering the *Village Voice's* charges, thereby lending them credibility and further inflaming an already supercharged situation, Kosinski's *Hermit* undertakes a study—albeit

[19]When Kosky is selecting a title for his new book, he decides against *The Hermit*, because he has heard that another writer named Jerzy Kosinski "is soon coming out with a novel called *The Hermit of 69th Street*." (Hermit, 378)

a convoluted one—of how writers (often unconsciously) borrow from other writers. In order to illustrate the patent unfairness of the *Village Voice* article, Kosinski decides to put his cards on the table—setting out the process by which he writes a novel. To accomplish this, he has to reveal how his mind functions. One of the first things the reader notices is that Kosinski has a keen historical sensibility. He is relentless in combing literary history for parallels with his situation. For example, Kosinski raises the question of whether Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* could be interpreted as having "usurped the folklore of the 1938 purges" (Hermit, 452) or whether *Amerika* could be seen as disingenuous, insofar as Kafka never visited the country which was the setting for his book. Kosinski must have known that this sort of approach—illustrating his own rectitude by sarcastically challenging the credibility of other writers—would likely baffle his readers, but he may have felt that he had no choice. Of all his potential responses to the scandal—such as suing the *Village Voice* or appearing on programs such as *Sixty Minutes* to protest his innocence—writing a book like *Hermit* may have seemed the best of a bad lot.

Kosinski had a need to move beyond questions of whether he was writing autobiography or fiction. He conceived of reality and imagination as being so integrally intertwined with perception, so bound up in how each individual sees the world, that it would be arbitrary and unwise to disconnect them from each other. As he moves through history, in *Hermit*, Kosinski attempts to find analogues with his own situation. He comes up with quite a number. Some are apropos (e.g. James Fenimore Cooper's difficult relationship with the American print media), some surprisingly astute (e.g. Thomas Jefferson's autobiography, which omits many inconvenient details of his life, as the first autofiction), some deliberately audacious (e.g. comparing his scandal with the Dreyfus Affair) and some plainly ludicrous (e.g. associating himself with the Jews surrounded by the Roman

Legions on Massada). These latter two are deliberately over the top, yet they give the reader a sense of Kosinski's creeping paranoia. He felt like a man under siege.

Hermit is created out of a deep sense of frustration and desperation. Kosinski seems fed up and exhausted by the constant scrutiny of both reviewers (who invariably review his work on the basis of what they know about his life) and the general public (who are fascinated by Kosinski's life, but largely indifferent to this work). *Hermit* is created by a man who is at odds with the world. He does not care that the analogues he employs in *Hermit* are totally contrived or that the book itself leaves the reader feeling distinctly unsatisfied. In *Hermit*, he is on one last mission and his ultimate objective takes precedence over the quality of the book itself. Kosinski is not concerned with trying to disguise the book's distinctly synthetic flavor. If anything, he draws attention to the fact that his autofictional approach to this book will displease many. In one of *Hermit's* many wordplays, Kosinski writes "fiction meaning invention, not convention." (Hermit, 373) Kosinski's priorities are clear. *Hermit* is more an experiment in structure than a novel as such. No accommodation may be made which will detract from *Hermit's* basic thesis, that nothing in literature is pure—including Kosinski's own approach to writing. Ideally, autofiction will keep the reader guessing as to the origins of what he/she is reading. In *Hermit*, Kosinski's priority is to portray autofiction as something of an inevitability: indeed, even the best written and well researched memoir contain elements of imagination, while works of fiction frequently grow out of the author's real life experience.

d) *Hermit* as Self Portrait

As has been previously discussed, there are biographical elements present in all of Kosinski's work. But *Hermit* goes far beyond the preceding eight novels in this regard. Simply put, Kosinski has squeezed more of himself into *Hermit*. So much so, that the

differences between Kosky and Kosinski are not always readily apparent. Their backgrounds, for example, are virtually identical. Both were born in Lódz before the war, are famous novelists, are profoundly troubled by their wartime childhoods, are interested in human rights and are troubled by accusations that their fiction is just "a thinly veiled attempt at autobiography." (Hermit, 501) They are also similar in their habits and affectations. They enjoy odd meals (of lemon and onions), habitually clip articles about themselves from newspapers and magazines, have self-deprecating senses of humour and love playing games. Many of the details that have been included in *Hermit* are easily verifiable references to events borrowed directly from Kosinski's life. For example, in the last years of Kosinski's life, his west coast friends were of tremendous comfort to him since they did not care much about the *Village Voice* scandal. The story of Warren Beatty trying to convince Kosinski to play the part of Grigori Zinoviev in *Reds* (an epic about the life of American journalist John Reed), is the inspiration for Kosky's relationship with Beau Brummel in *Hermit*. After seeing Kosky at the Academy Awards, Brummel, a renowned actor and director, asks him to play the part of Nikolai Bukharin in his new movie, *Total State*. At first Kosky is reticent to undertake this challenge, but Brummel convinces him (just as Beatty did Kosinski) that acting in a major Hollywood production will provide new experiences to write about. There are many other allusions to Kosinski's personal life and the people he knew: his practical joke on Abba Eban (referred to as the Israeli ambassador in *Hermit*), his strange encounter with Peter Sellers (Shaman Peters in *Hermit*) angling to land the role of Chance in the movie version of *Being There* and his brief romantic liaison with Halina Poswiatowska (Helena Powska in *Hermit*), a poet from his homeland whom he encountered a few years after he arrived in America.

As *Hermit* unfolds page by page, Kosinski's astonishment (over the public reaction to the *Village Voice* story) seems to give way to frustration (and then resignation) at being unable to challenge the popular perception that he was some sort of fraud. Kosinski's

personal crisis is played out on the pages of *Hermit*, through his protagonist. Kosky is the subject of a scandal (which will be discussed shortly) that devastates his public image. He feels so persecuted that he cannot even bother to respond to most of what is being said about him. He wallows in sorrow, convinced that rehabilitating himself is impossible. In its review of *Hermit*, the *New York Times* describes Kosky as carrying his inner terror about like "ten extra pounds around the middle." (Batchelor 1988, 11) The scandal hovers above him like a cloud of despair. It never dissipates. In *Hermit*, Kosinski's irritation seems to explode out at the reader every time he contemplates the patent injustice of his situation, being held to what he considers a much higher standard than other writers. Similarly, Kosky cannot stand being the subject of rumour and innuendo. *Hermit* is populated with characters who never tire of speculating about the protagonist's plight. The vice-president of the lie detector company, for example, tells him that "we think we could help you answer once and for all the question, WHAT IN YOUR LIFE IS FICTION?"[20] (Hermit, 424) Kosky's own perceptions have been carefully and deliberately excluded from the public discourse. This is clearly taken from Kosinski's own experience. At some point, he must have realized that the scandal had its own momentum and had quickly grown beyond his capacity to control it. People would say and believe what they wished, no matter what Kosinski did to contradict them. He decided to stay silent and let his writing do the talking for him. Kosky reaches a similar conclusion—that he will not, in any appreciable way, be able to influence the direction that the scandal had taken—so he dedicates himself to creating a book, *The Healer*, which will debunk the notion that his inner buoyancy is some kind of optical illusion.

Hermit functions as a retrospective on Kosinski's life (to that point) and a veritable catalogue of his pet peeves. Kosky is infuriated by the notion that his work is never judged entirely on its merits and that people cannot appreciate him first and foremost as a

[20]Caps by Kosinski.

novelist. For example, after affecting the release of a dissident Indostrani writer from a PERSAUD prison, the dissident meets with Kosky to thank him and ask him how he was able to accomplish this task. "How did you manage to get me out? What methods did you use? Blackmail? Terror? Did you ever threaten to blow them up on a ski lift?" (Hermit, 221) The ski lift, of course, is a reference to *Blind Date*. Kosinski's point is clear. Even another writer seems incapable of understanding that there is a separation between a novelist's life and work. The inference is that Kosky's characters are somehow an extension of himself. This is poignantly illustrated in a note that Kosky receives from one of his readers:

> Norbert: I've just finished reading your evil horse novel, and as a result I'm finished with you as a writer, and I hope you're finished as a man. Judging by what you did to the Fat Girl on page 169—simply because she was "as fit as a bass fiddle" (*Buf*), and stupid enough to fall for a man like you—you must be one of the meanest pricks on earth. Yours, Patricia Peggotty. (My friends call me Fat Pat.)
> (Hermit, 33)

Kosinski had discussed 'Fat Pat' and the phenomenon of readers thinking he was his protagonists in a 1984 interview in the *Los Angeles Times*. Like his protagonist, Kosinski did not treat such people with seriousness, and as a result, he would not reply to their letters. In Kosinski's own words, these people were "writing to my fictional character," not to any flesh and blood person. (Abrams 1984, 214) No matter how well drawn, characters remain inventions of the author's imagination. A reader incapable of differentiating Fabian from Kosinski was to be pitied, but not humoured. To Kosinski, this misperception—that he was his protagonists—was just another version of what some of his harshest critics had been saying for years: that his work was nothing more than a recapitulation of his personal biography. The irony is that his most vociferous critic, the *Village Voice* newspaper, had purported that Kosinski had made up most of the

details of his life story anyway. This would tend to support the supposition that his work was fiction in the truest 'untrue' or invented meaning of that word.

Hermit is easily Kosinski's most transparent book. From the opening pages, it never seeks to hide its true intentions from the reader. In this sense at least, the book is a success: the reader is taken on a guided tour of the writing process, joined in progress. Kosinski's impatience is readily apparent throughout the book as he reveals his yearning to restore his good name. The reader cannot help but feel Jerzy Kosinski's presence on its pages. Plugging away on *Hermit*, struggling to accurately depict his time and place, Kosinski is presented as part of a long intellectual and literary tradition. In order to alleviate any lasting doubts that people may have had about him, he escorts the reader through the world as he sees and experiences it. This has the net effect of eliminating any doubts that the reader might harbour regarding the authorship of his books. *Hermit's* autobiographical elements bring the reader ever closer to Kosinski, from his allusions to *The Painted Bird* ("I've been voiceless before") (Hermit, 475), to his rejection of a legal remedy against *The Courier* (the newspaper which originally printed the allegations against him), to the comet that he keeps in the trunk of his car, to the fact that his father admonishes him to "Live your life unnoticed." (Hermit, 71)

Indeed, in a note at the beginning of *Hermit*—Kosinski (as Kosky's fictional literary executor) advises the reader that *Hermit* is an incomplete version of Kosky's working papers and that future versions of this book will incorporate new material as it becomes available. This is something that Kosinski is well known for—revising his work both after and sometimes during publication. Even the uniquely Eastern European grammatical inflections that the reader occasionally comes across in *Hermit* seem evocative of Kosinski the man. The structure of sentences such as: "I would rather kiss every day[21]

[21]Underlining by M.O.

the dirty feet of any Ruthenian peasant..." (Hermit, 402) or "we think we could help you answer once and for all the question,[22] WHAT IN YOUR LIFE IS FICTION?" (Hermit, 424) or "anything is better than confronting again the Ghetto of Lódz" (Hermit, 123) illustrates that Kosinski is still capable of lapsing back into what would be proper grammar, but in another language. Again, the reader is taken to the heart of the creative process, to the place that language originates. This is the sort of first draft error that had been excised from his previous novels. Whether consciously included in *Hermit* or not, these sorts of sentences offer an uncharacteristically revealing glimpse of Kosinski. At these raw points in the text, where his sentence structure buckles, it almost feels like Kosinski himself is making a cameo appearance in the text. The topics he takes on in *Hermit* frequently have a similar effect, of putting the reader in mind of him and the crisis that he had to endure after the scandal broke.

e) Praying to the Savage God

Kosinski's fiction frequently touches on the topic of self-murder. Suicides or attempted suicides occur in *The Painted Bird*, *Steps*, *Devil Tree*, *Cockpit* and *Passion Play*. *Hermit's* approach to this subject is distinctly different, however. Whereas in the aforementioned novels it is dealt with as a part of the plot, in *Hermit,* Kosinski's approach is more like a researcher's, tackling a challenging topic. He puts suicide under a microscope, at one point taking an entire chapter to discuss suicides notes. When Kosky witnesses a man jumping to his death from the eighth floor of a high-rise, it prompts him to think about "what's left of the man after he has left." (Hermit, 458) Kosky wonders about the details of the man's life. What led up to the fateful moment when suicide seemed like a wise (or at least unavoidable) decision? These details—whether he was a spurned lover, a man consumed by guilt or simply a person who had endured a lifetime of disappointments and did not

[22]Underlining by M.O.

wish to continue on in this manner—are in fact the context of the man's life. Kosinski must have wondered how he would be seen in the years after his death, whether the scandal would be all that people remembered, or whether his early novels would carry the day and become his legacy. As with so many other topics in *Hermit*, Kosinski has clearly studied and reflected upon this subject at length.

He includes statistics (e.g. suicide is the second leading cause of death of those under twenty-six) (Hermit, 457), quotes from different texts (e.g. A. Alvarez's *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*), and lists many noteworthy suicides, from Tadeusz Borowski to the ninety-three female students of the Beth Yakov religious school in Warsaw who, in 1942, swallowed poison rather than become prostitutes for the SS, to Arthur and Cynthia Koestler. The Koestlers are particularly significant because they committed suicide in the manner recommended by the Hemlock society: barbiturates, alcohol and plastic bags over their heads. This is also the manner that Kosinski settled upon (though it is unclear whether he had been drinking) once he made the decision to take his own life. It has been said that the method of self-murder selected infers something of the suicide's state of mind. The Hemlock method is quiet, rapid, effective, easy and painless (apparently even relaxing), and leaves a pristine corpse, whereas jumping off buildings and shooting oneself is far more bloody and is selected to attract attention and horrify bystanders and loved ones. In addition, these latter methods have been known to fail. Kosinski wished to end his own tortured life, but it seems certain that he did not wish to die to hurt anyone in his life or make any specific point. On the contrary, he was very concerned about how his wife Kiki might react to it.

Kosinski tended to write about the things that were occurring in his life. As he wrote *Hermit*, the nuts and bolts of suicide began to attract his attention. He had always been fascinated by it, but now he began to see it as a viable alternative to the prolongation of

his life. His suicide was part of a downward spiral that appears to have begun around the time of the scandal. However, the *Village Voice* piece was published nearly nine years before his death. Thus the actual act did not seem to correspond to any one particular event. Rather, it seems to have something to do with his realizing the full extent of what he had lived through. Of course, as is so often the case in suicide, no one really knows why he selected that particular moment (during the early morning hours of May 3, 1991) to do himself in. He had a number of personal and professional concerns which did not seem likely to be satisfactorily redressed, but according to his wife and friends, Kosinski was in good spirits in the days prior to his death. Within his own thoughts, however, something else must have been unfolding. The way he had lived his life had caught up with him. Suddenly suicide began to look more and more like a way out—of future health problems, of more bad reviews and of more failed projects in Poland. There is a distinct feeling of despair that pervades *Hermit*. When Kosky participates in a writing exercise in which a group of scientists attempt to distinguish fictional suicides notes (written by noteworthy authors) from actual suicide notes, the experiment proves an exercise in futility. The scientists are only correct about half the time. The conclusion is obvious. If people in real agony are unable to convey their feelings to others any more vividly than writers asked to participate in an experiment, the logical conclusion is that communication with others is largely a waste of time. The boy in *The Painted Bird* reaches a similar conclusion: "it mattered little if one was mute; people did not understand one another anyway." (PB, 249)

In a section near the end of the book, Kosinski includes a reference to a 1974 *New York Post* article about suicide notes. He sees a poignant irony (and humour) in their utter banality. For Kosinski, such matters as petty debts and spark plugs do not belong in these notes, which trivialize the final act of one's existence. (Hermit, 505-506) For Kosinski, suicide was essentially a defensive countermeasure, "an alternative when one's

freedom of action" had run out. (Sloan 1996, 330) If ever life became untenable or unbearable on any level, suicide could not be ruled out. Kosinski had stated this in a number of interviews, but those who knew him tended not to take him literally. To them, it may have seemed like he was up to his usual tricks, trying to shock or offend either the interviewer or those who would later read the interview. Kosinski's public persona was grounded in the notion that he was the ultimate survivor, so the idea of him hurting himself did not occur to people, at least until it was too late to save him (quite literally) from himself. Indeed, if he could tackle writing a novel in the immediate aftermath of the scandal, then he must have seemed emotionally indestructible. The truth, of course, is that he was more vulnerable than anyone knew. His brazenness and braggadocio were a cover for enormous insecurity. As Kosinski himself said in 1979, "I am not a suicide freak, but I want to be free." (Taylor 1991, 37) True to his word, Kosinski took his own life only when he became convinced that he had outlived his usefulness and would soon be a burden to his wife. Kosinski had thoroughly studied the psychology of suicide. His note reaffirmed his love for his wife, making sure that she knew she was not to blame. Indeed, the note itself tries to assuage her horror (because she was going to be the person to discover his corpse), arguing that death is much like sleep, the only difference being that this time his slumber would be for eternity. (Sloan 1996, 445)

f) Floating Through the Scandal

In *Hermit*, the scandal is represented through metaphor. In the first portion of the book, Kosky is said to be floating along through life, "buoyed up by [his] own most buoyant Self." (Hermit, 252) When two journalists begin digging into his life, questioning his friends and lovers and finally interviewing Kosky himself about his unusual aptitude, it becomes clear that they have a specific agenda: they have surrendered any pretense of objectivity and are intent on devastating Kosky's reputation. For example, they are very

selective about which questions they will ask Kosky. They clearly do not believe what he says about himself and they wish to pass this view on to their readers. The two *Courier* writers conjecture that during his time swimming in the literary waters of America, Kosky has been employing some sort of illicit floatation device.

> "This is a probe into the nature of his floating, which we believe is a crude water act—acted out with the help of a secretly worn, and by now worn-out, wet vest...perhaps invisible, or hidden inside his empty testicles or sore scrotum." (Hermit, 325)

After the publication of the article, his life as he has known it is over. Whenever he goes and wherever he turns, people have already heard of the allegations against him. The *Courier* article convinces them that his accomplishments are no more than a magic trick. (Hermit, 325) For an already insecure man, concerned about what remains once a person dies, this is a particularly devastating turn of events. In the space of a few hundred words, two men have undone the work of a lifetime. Both his reputation and his books are now tainted. That the story itself is flimsy—the reporters' evidence consisting of a twenty year old ad for swimming instructors (implying that Kosky had had help in increasing the buoyancy of his work), a number of different interviews with Kosky (in which there are discrepancies in his assertions about his biography) and a flurry of ambivalent statements from his former instructors, swim coaches and friends—seems to concern no one but Kosky.

The article raises doubts about everything from his "creative breathing" to his "questionable" swimming career. (Hermit, 327-328) Although the reporters are unusually effective in conveying their side of the story, they neglect to present Kosky's side. Their assumption, which turns out to be correct, is that people will immediately assume the worst in regard to Kosky. The public concludes—in some sense by default—that Kosky

has either exaggerated or lied about virtually every detail of his life. Kosky is stunned by the article. As in the actual 1982 *Village Voice* piece, "Jerzy Kosinski's Tainted Words," the *Courier* article also makes reference to *The Painted Bird*: "The Punctured Bladder—Did He Ever Swim By Himself?" (Hermit, 324) The headline merely poses a question to the reader, but the implication—that he is guilty of perpetrating some sort of fraud—is obvious. Kosky sees the *Courier* headline as the ultimate insult to his integrity as a writer. It is common knowledge that Kosinski was badly wounded by what Geoffrey Stokes and Eliot Fremont-Smith had written. In *Hermit*, his resentment rings out loud and clear, as he rails against the mistreatment that he was forced to endure. When another character describes the *Courier* piece as "two fucking shits from some underground rag spitting illiterate spittle in your face," the reader can almost hear Kosinski ranting with indignation. (Hermit, 468) In Kosinski's prior work, other characters sometimes demonstrate their scorn through spitting. The protagonists of *The Painted Bird*, *Steps* and *Blind Date* all undergo this particular form of defilement (or perhaps anointment). That Kosinski again employed this particular metaphor in *Hermit* to delimit the extent of the affront to his dignity is particularly significant. This last book leaves no room for ambiguity about his feelings. Indeed, at the conclusion of the novel, Kosky is grabbed by faceless men who drag him to the end of the pier, past one sign reading "Impasse" and another marked "Dead End," before flinging him into the water. (Hermit, 527) Kosinski clearly considered the *Village Voice* piece something beyond mere yellow journalism and something more akin to libel.

Outside Eastern Europe, Kosinski had not previously experienced this sort of unfriendly press and he resented the *Village Voice's* attempt to redefine him in terms he found inaccurate and unjust. To him, "Jerzy Kosinski's Tainted Words" was nothing short of an ad hominem assault on his integrity as both a writer and a man. Indeed, the *Village Voice* article is absolutely withering in its denunciation of Kosinski:

> No novelist with any claim to seriousness can hire people to do without acknowledgment the sorts of *composition* that we usually call writing. To purchase another's words is to cheat the reader, to trash the tradition. For almost 10 years now, Jerzy Kosinski has been treating his art as though it were just another commodity, a widgit [sic] to be assembled by anonymous hired hands.
> (Stokes & Fremont-Smith 1982, 41)

Hermit eventually became "an ambitious attempt to set the literary record straight while attempting to set a new literary record." (Lupack 1988, 261) It is important to Kosinski that nothing which the *Village Voice* said about him be treated with credibility. Kosinski has very carefully selected *Hermit's* water motif in order to debunk what had been written about him. In the convoluted context of *Hermit*, floating would appear to represent fame, while swimming roughly corresponds with his life as a writer.

> Now these are hardly serious charges. Under normal conditions, how many normal people would believe that a man who can float can't swim? (Hermit, 327)

To publish so many books, and achieve such renown, Kosinski must have had something, beyond mere chutzpah, to explain his success. Here, Kosinski seems especially exposed (and perhaps somewhat naive as well). He really needs the reader to accept his version of events. He undertakes to make his case in a number of different ways. First, he shows "that he does not lack the talent or cultural awareness to generate and write his own books." (Gladsky 1999, 381) Second, he integrates his life and art so completely—and demonstrates a writing style so distinctive—that he leaves no doubt as to his being the primary creative force behind *Hermit*. (Lupack 1988, 261) Kosinski also downplays the importance the *Village Voice* article ("At best, a newspaper is a pool of public opinion—never a court.") (Hermit, 439) and ridicules its suppositions ("Great editors do not discover or produce great authors; great authors create and produce great editors.") (Hermit, 454) This is perhaps Kosinski's most convincing answer to Stokes and Fremont-

Smith: that the process of editing may enhance a brilliantly conceived and written text, but that by itself, editing cannot transform mediocrity into transcendence.

At the same time, Kosinski is determined to show that writers regularly build on the work of other authors, and that he is no exception. At one point in *Hermit*, after the scandal has overwhelmed his life, he encounters Simon Thomas Temple, Sr., a so-called Textual Context Special Investigator. Temple tells Kosky that "Yours is a typical writer's lot." (Hermit, 298) Temple has a theory of 'Literary Infringement' which he describes to Kosky.

> By tracing what and how authors write to what and how other writers already have written, I can prove that any text (or any author), no matter how recent, new and original, is not original at all, and I can prove it beyond reasonable doubt. (Hermit, 300)

Kosinski wishes the reader to be aware that "all writers invade" (Hermit, 313) and that he was not the first writer to encroach "upon...literary folklore." (Hermit, 304) Insofar as his work was informed by other texts, Kosinski wishes the reader to accept the supposition that he was not so far outside the mainstream of his chosen profession. If one embraces this assumption, that writers borrow from one another all the time, then what ended up happening to Kosinski was demonstrably unfair. He had been held to a standard that other writers had not. *Hermit* was a particularly unusual and innovative way of illustrating that Kosinski was indeed the author of his books and that any "literary infringement" which had occurred in the construction of his novels was devoid of malevolent intent. It was just a writer doing what comes most naturally: writing. The price of accomplishing this goal was high. Kosinski sacrifices continuity and coherence in favour of a profusion of footnotes and quotations. But in the end, there is little doubt that

anyone besides Kosinski himself would have any motivation to create a work of this nature.

Of course, what originally made the scandal possible was Kosinski's high profile in the New York literary community. If Kosinski had been a less prominent author, no one would have taken notice of what Stokes and Fremont-Smith had written. Indeed, were he not famous, the *Village Voice* almost certainly would not have assigned anyone to investigate the discrepancies in Kosinski's biography in the first place. In *Hermit*, Kosinski seems to be acknowledging this. Early on, when Kosky is asked to present an Academy Award, he debates with the producer-director of the show, Oswald Ortolan, the disadvantages of being a celebrity. Kosky recounts how his father had warned him about the fleeting nature of fame. To him, "fame, reputation and notoriety are derivative states of being" in that they are entirely dependent on other people. (Hermit, 151) Oswald Ortolan answers that Kosky's father is certainly not an American.

> "Believe me, in this country, fame is as good as reputation, maybe better, and much tougher to lose...one bad headline, in even the smallest paper, can cost you your reputation, however good, while no headline can kill fame which, made of headlines, in this country is synonymous with notoriety." (Hermit, 152)

Again, Kosky makes the mistake of disregarding his father's advice. Though Kosky has had a long career as a writer, Oswald Ortolan points out that Kosky's books reach relatively few people: "Books? Fuck the books! I'm talking fame." (Hermit, 151) To a man like Ortolan, fame is the ultimate achievement. Kosky's novels mean nothing if they do not get him invitations to appear on late night talk shows. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Kosinski perceived fame as a means to an end. His outrageous claims and bizarre stories had the net effect of erecting a mythology around him. He quickly learned how to utilize the mass media to increase his readership. Kosinski seems to treat the world of

celebrity as a game to be won, very nearly like the book-knock-off matches that the protagonist of *Steps* dominates. Kosinski was very adept at the fame game, attracting far more than his fifteen minutes, but he was evidently not quite adroit enough to avoid being overtaken and then devoured by the American media machine. In retrospect, it seems inevitable that someone would begin investigating Kosinski's claims, especially after the publication of Barbara Gelb's *New York Times Magazine* cover story, "Being Jerzy Kosinski," in February 1982. Kosinski was shrewd and certainly understood the risks of the game he was playing, but he had been seduced by the notion of being a writer-raconteur-celebrity-sportsman. Because he had not previously been called on his prevarications, he may have been lulled into a false sense of invincibility. Since each of his successive biographical embellishments would be printed or broadcast verbatim, without any obvious consequences, he may have felt that he could keep upping the ante indefinitely.

When events quickly overtake Kosky and his reputation is ravaged, Ortolan's prediction comes true: Kosky's notoriety (in part because of the scandal) continues on uninterrupted. Throughout *Hermit*, Kosinski ruminates on the nature of fame. At first, Kosky is not convinced that the situation with the *Courier* newspaper is not a blessing in disguise, but the publicity director of his publishing house quickly disabuses him of this notion:

> "Our advertising department says you couldn't buy all this unsolicited adversity for six million bucks! As a result, you've been overexposed!" (Hermit, 431)

The director sees Kosky's infamy as having supplanted his fame. And he understands that the scandal will only undermine Kosky's already lethargic sales figures. Kosky is no longer credible as a writer: people assume everything he says is a lie. He is portrayed as a

man very nearly incapable of telling the truth. His reputation is increasingly that of an amoral opportunist. The media insists on portraying him as a sort of literary O.J. Simpson, a man now more renowned for his misdeeds and alleged transgressions, than for his original exploits. Whatever Kosky says is immediately twisted by the press to make him appear evasive and devious. His public statements, about his affinity for relaxing in hotel swimming pools, are a case in point. In the symbolic storyline of *Hermit*, Kosky gets into trouble for downplaying his capacity for swimming and bragging about his capacity for floating. Though he did not say that he could not swim—only that he was not a world-class swimmer—and that he was a far better floater than a swimmer, the press somehow contorts the story into the impossible assertion that Kosky can float without being able to swim. In essence, Kosinski is asserting that Kosky is a better self-promoter or showman (or floater) than he is a writer (or swimmer). Nevertheless, this is not the same as asserting that Kosky is devoid of writing/swimming talent. The press, however, has a mind of its own. The *Courier's* accusations against Kosky circulate through the popular press. Soon the idea spreads that nothing Kosky has ever said about himself can be trusted: his entire life is said to be nothing more than an elaborate act of legerdemain. Kosky desperately wants to tell his side of the story, but he has already been tried and convicted in the press. He feels especially despondent over this turn of events because he knows that he has no one to blame but himself. Years before, his father, Israel Kosky, had warned him about the troubling side effects of fame:

> To be known "means going out to the world, in order to beheaded [sic] by it." (Israel Kosky) (Hermit, 434)

The injustice of the *Courier's* allegations are incidental. In the end, Kosky's notoriety has actually alienated him from others. He is unsure how to proceed and eventually settles upon the idea of creating a book, *The Healer*, which will rehabilitate his shattered reputation.

The restoration of his standing in the New York literary community is clearly Kosinski's intent in *Hermit*. Unfortunately, this approach was not especially successful. If anything, *Hermit* probably convinced some readers that Kosinski had either suffered some sort of mental collapse or was in such an advanced state of denial that he had convinced himself of his own innocence. *Hermit* is a recollection of the incredibly bizarre place that Kosinski found himself in the months after the scandal, and the place he felt he was destined to remain, if he did not do something to try to transform the prevailing public perception. Indeed, the months after the scandal may well have been the most curious period of Kosinski's life. In *Hermit*, the reader can feel Kosinski's uncertainty, both about how he would like to be remembered and about how much of himself he had to put into *Hermit* in order to expunge the notion that his work was not his own. In the end, Kosinski takes the *Village Voice* allegations so seriously that he decides on a self-reflexive approach in *Hermit*. By continually making reference to his prior fiction, Kosinski makes it difficult for the reader to detach the man from his work. Instead, Kosinski shows how various ideas explored in *Hermit* are merely extensions of things he had written about years earlier. In a very real sense, he is not only beholden to other writers but also to himself. This is the subject of the next section.

g) The Self-Reflexive Novel

Hermit's autofictional framework is useful to Kosinski because it allows him to jump back and forth, almost at will, between history and fiction. He may introduce whatever material suits his purposes, whenever he wishes. And he may be as thorough or cursory as he needs to be. In this book, traditional storytelling is abandoned in favour of something much more experimental, and perhaps universal. *Hermit* is filled with the intellectual reverberations of a hundred different authors and thinkers. Kosinski has borrowed from their work to enhance the journey through his book. He wishes people to

recognize that regardless of how many sources directly or indirectly influenced the composition of a given book, it remains the creation of its author. The sources which Kosinski chooses to cite in *Hermit* are an intrinsic part of the creative process. Though this may be cold comfort to the readers of *Hermit*, it is nevertheless a vital point. In a lifetime, a person's thoughts are influenced by those they meet, the places they have visited and the books they have studied. Kosinski wanted his readers to recognize this fact and apply it to their evaluation of his life and work. There may be no plot to follow in *Hermit*, but there is a slowly evolving picture of the author which emerges. It is Kosinski's own story, told in the guise of a type of historiographic metafiction. *Hermit* never tries to pass itself off as truth in any narrow, legalistic sense, but it is nevertheless a uniquely personal self-exploration.

Hermit argues that a work of literature should not exist in isolation. It must first be written and then read in the context of other books. Kosinski seems to be asking if an author's work is inherently less valuable because it was informed by a variety of different sources. *Hermit* is a very personal document not only because it traces the horror of Kosinski's life in the aftermath of the scandal, but also because he finally feels safe enough (or perhaps vulnerable enough—since he really has nothing left to lose after the publication of the *Village Voice* article) to finally lower his defenses and reveal a small part of himself. It may not be as much as readers might have liked, but it was far more than had ever been revealed before (especially prior to the scandal). *Hermit* leaves no doubt that Kosinski's fictional canon was informed by a wide variety of sources. The lesson here is that a life is not only what one lives through, but also what one reads and how one thinks. Kosinski never chose to write a traditional autobiography, but *Hermit* may provide something inherently more valuable. Kosinski allows the reader to see how and even why he writes. His last book takes the reader on a journey, to the heart of who Kosinski was as a man and a writer. He was not particularly interested in minutiae such

as names and dates. His focus is instead on larger issues, such as where the individual fits into history and what remains of a man after he dies. In the last years of his life, Kosinski was clearly grappling with his own mortality. He wanted some say in his legacy: the *Village Voice's* allegations could not be allowed to go unchallenged. *Hermit* shows how Kosinski's characters and books are all part of who he was. Again, it is not a memoir, but it does reveal a great deal about the state of mind of the man who created it.

Throughout *Hermit*, Kosinski habitually references not only the important events of his own life, but also his previous work. *Hermit* thus functions as an overview of what he had accomplished as a writer up until the scandal. As if to underscore this point, *Hermit* makes both subtle and overt references to every one of Kosinski's novels. He also quotes from a number of speeches (including his own comments at the 1982 Academy Awards), references his articles (such as "Death at Cannes" and "Dead Souls on Campus") and cites his own ruminations on his fiction (e.g. *Notes of the Author*). *Hermit* is a retrospective on Kosinski's life and work. There are allusions to other protagonists such as Tarden (e.g. in one of Kosky's novels, a protagonist named Cocksure is said to enjoy using "his secret knowledge to emotionally punish and sexually humiliate his various lovers.") (Hermit, 140), puns about his prior work (e.g. Kosky's aide at the Academy Awards ceremony is described as a 'blank page,' the original working title of *Being There*), speculation on what might have been had the scandal not occurred (e.g. in Kosky's world, *Pinball* is successfully adapted into a musical), direct quotes from his major works (e.g. Kosinski cites his own description of a comet from *The Painted Bird*), and citations referencing the work of some of his 'real life' fictional characters (like his friend Jacques Monod, who appears as a character in *Blind Date*) as well as other friends who played a large role in the last years of his life (such as Bryon L. Sherwin).

Hermit may be read as a kind of postmortem on Kosinski's career. Near the end of the book, after Kosky's publisher informs him that his new book, *The Healer*, did not sell even one copy, Kosky begins wondering where he went wrong. (Hermit, 489) He ponders how things reached this point, where not one person would buy his book.

> Was it perhaps wrong for his publishers to display him clad only in the briefest of swimming briefs, floating like a lotus in the center of an old Southampton swimming pool lost amidst the potato fields, the very fields which are about to become a new center of Old World polo? (Hermit, 489)

This is an exact description of the dust jacket which Kosinski's publishers eventually selected for the hardbound version of *Hermit*. Kosky also ponders whether his beguiling descriptions of his book, as "spiritual autofocus"[23] and "calculated depth-of-field autoexposure" and "self-focus priority" could have hurt its sales. (Hermit, 489-490) Kosinski anticipated only too well the unkind reception that his experiment in autofiction would elicit. This did not seem to concern him: with *Hermit*, he did not have the same goals, of reaching a greater audience, as in his previous work. A steep price had to be paid—in terms of decreased readership—for such an audacious experiment in form. By the time that the *Village Voice* piece was published, Kosinski knew that much of his audience had already deserted him anyway. As a result, he could take new directions in his writing. In that sense, the scandal presented him with a singular opportunity to explore at length where things had gone wrong. The first protagonist to openly ponder this question is Domostroy in *Pinball* (while he is a guest on a talk show), but Kosinski is clearly grappling with this issue in other books as well. Kosinski's reference to the Dick Cavett show is instructive:

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[23] In a 1980 interview with the *Washington Star*, Kosinski claimed to be working on both a script and a novel called *Autofocus*, about a New York fashion photographer. (Collins 1980, 188) Presumably some of the ideas from this project were eventually folded into *Hermit*.

> **What went wrong? We still have a minute, General! (Dick Cavett to the just fallen leader of South Vietnam.)**[24] (Hermit, 521)

There is a sense of resignation here, of the utter futility of explanations in general, in this citation. By this point in Kosinski's life, he was tired of being asked why he did not reply to what had been printed about him. It is at moments such as these, when *Hermit* seems to speak through metaphor, that it becomes clear how Kosinski's last book functions. Kosinski's exasperation at trying to comprehend what led up to his own misfortune is readily apparent. Cavett's attempt to have the general neatly and succinctly sum up the war for his viewers is every bit as hollow as the self-serving explanations and rationalizations always offered by celebrities after they are caught in compromising situations. Kosinski felt no pressing need to attempt to rehabilitate himself in this manner. Though he was very effective on television, what he wanted was to leave behind a book about the scandal, so readers could decide for themselves what had gone awry in his life. Kosinski may have felt that by placing a document like *Hermit* into the Library of Congress, he could more effectively influence the thoughts of those who mattered most, including his biographers and those who would analyze his work in the future. *Hermit's* self-reflexive structure, continually referencing his prior work, allows Kosinski to paint a self-portrait based on an overview of his life. *Hermit* portrays a troubled man who lived through an embarrassing scandal, but who was nevertheless the legitimate author of a number of influential works.

In *Hermit*, Kosinski seems especially proud of *The Painted Bird* and his screenplay for Hal Ashby's *Being There*. He revisits them a number of times. It is possible that he believed that after his death, these two works would come to define him. Throughout the text, Kosinski includes references to such matters as the manure pit in which he lost his

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[24]Bold type by Kosinski.

voice and the punctured fish bladder to which the child compares himself after seeing Ewka having intimate relations with both her brother and a goat. With regard to *Being There*, Chance (played by an actor whom Kosinski calls Shaman Peters) makes a memorable cameo appearance in *Hermit*. Peters, a thinly disguised representation of Peter Sellers, telephones Kosky to complain that Kosky's novel about him was a gross violation of his privacy. The two agree to meet, to resolve the issue. When Kosky asks Shaman Peters when he first read his novel, Peters behaves as though he is Chance:

> "I haven't read it!" Peters admits. "Like your Chance—or Chauncey—I like to watch, remember?" (Hermit, 173)

According to James Park Sloan, this is an accurate approximation of the enigmatic manner in which Sellers initially approached Kosinski about the lead role in *Being There*. Sellers believed that Chance's blandness was in fact closer to his true self than any of the other memorable roles he had played in his career, such as Dr. Strangelove or Inspector Clouseau. In *Hermit*, Kosinski pays tribute to Sellers' versatility, calling him (in an admiring footnote) "that shaman of the silver screen." (Hermit, 435) As Kosky flips channels, waiting to see his life and work dissected on "Controversy!," he briefly stops and watches Shaman Peters performance in his "favorite American movie devoted to a story of the first American-made entirely spiritual media man." (Hermit, 441) The movie is clearly meant to represent *Being There*. Kosinski even goes so far as to include, in the text of *Hermit*, the message that Chance is told to deliver to Raphael.

> ABBAZ
> "Dead, my ass! Now get this, honkie—you tell Raphael that I ain't takin' no jive from anybody! You tell that asshole, if he got somethin' to tell me to get his ass down here himself!"
> (edges closer to Chance)
> "You got that, boy?"
> (Hermit, 441)

Kosinski's experiences in Hollywood had generally been quite positive. The *Being There* film project was no exception. Not only was the movie well received by critics, it was also a box office success and was nominated for a number of prestigious awards, with Melvyn Douglas winning the Oscar for best supporting actor in the role of Benjamin Rand. The *Being There* script was one of the last successes of Kosinski's life. The work that came after was not particularly well thought of. Kosinski wanted to be remembered as a man who could still write books that mattered. Of course, Kosinski does not confine his references to *Being There*. Throughout the text, Kosinski gets into the habit of referencing most of his fictional creations, including a number of his female characters. Some are only mentioned in passing, such as EE, Andrea Gwynplaine and Stupid Ludmila, but others actually interact with Kosky. For example, a sloppy woman, reminiscent of the one who falls in love with Fabian, meets Kosky in a bar and further on in *Hermit*, a singer named Carmela Leroy, who closely resembles Donna Downes, enjoys a romantic rendezvous with Kosky in his apartment. Throughout *Hermit*, a woman named Cathy Young moves in and out of Kosky's life. In the context of the novel, it is rumoured that she is the real life inspiration for Nameless. (Hermit, 199) More than the other characters in *Hermit*, she seems to understand and appreciate Kosky. When the *Courier* reporters ask her about Kosky, her response is cryptic and playful, in keeping with the mood of the rest of the book:

> 'Don't believe a word he says...His mind is a haunted tenement, stuffed with myths, not facts.' (Hermit, 199)

It is clear that Kosky has deep feelings for Cathy: indeed, he pays her—what is for him—the ultimate compliment when he refers to her as his "ideal sexual samovar (SS)." (Hermit, 194) Cathy tries to protect Kosky from the *Courier* reporters, whom she suspects are out to besmirch his reputation and she banters with him, stroking his ego and providing support when the scandal overwhelms his life. Though a rumour circulates that

she is planning to write a book about her relationship with Kosky, in the end, she merely advises Kosky to do something dramatic to refute the charges against him.

> "Norbert, my love," says Cathy, snapping open one button of her tunic. "This is the boldest moment of your adulthood. Defend yourself against the Ultimate Threat.®...Plot a real-life potboiler about all this L'Affaire." (Hermit, 351)

The book Cathy is describing is *The Healer*, a work that allows people inside Kosky's ordeal. Kosky loves and admires Cathy, going so far as to describes her as his 'dombi,' a term which in Tantra means "ideal and idealized woman, the essence at once of spirituality and sexuality." (Sloan 1996, 412) In *Hermit*, Kosinski treats his female characters with uncharacteristic kindness and generosity.[25] The presence of Cathy in *Hermit* illustrates that when the spirit moves him, the Kosinskian man can still function in a relationship. Cathy represents hope, in many ways. She is the first (and last) woman whom the Kosinskian man treats as an equal.

h) *Hermit* as the Supreme Intertextual Nexus

In his discussion of *Pinball*, Welch D. Everman describes Kosinski's 1982 novel as "an intricate network of...quotations, cross references, elaborations, and allusions" and "an intertextual nexus." (Everman 1991, 148-149) Clearly *Hermit* takes up where *Pinball* leaves off. In the aftermath of the scandal, Kosinski had an irresistible need to prove himself to his readers. In *Hermit,* he attempts to overwhelm the reader with a profusion of diverse sources. *Hermit* may, at first, appear as an act of intellectual hubris, but after

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[25]It is as though Kosinski is trying to answer John Leonard's "Death is the *Blind Date*" review from the November 7, 1977 edition of the *New York Times*. In this article, Leonard suggests that in order for Kosinski to realize his full potential as a novelist, he must first learn to treat his female characters with greater consideration. (Leonard 1977, 33)

further consideration, it seems motivated more by Kosinski's own insecurity than by any sense of conceit. Its eclectic references paint a portrait of Kosinski as a well-read cosmopolite who had no wish or need to pass off the work of other people as his own. But Kosinski's desire to strut his intellectual credentials is a doubled-edged sword. By trying to vindicate himself in this manner—massive reliance on sources—he appears like the anti-Semite protesting that some of his best friends are Jewish. His defense does nothing to move the spotlight off him. Rather, it makes the reader more suspicious of his motives. Had *Hermit* included fewer footnotes and quotations, it is possible that less attention would have been focused on the allegations. By appearing so defensive about the matter of originality, and taking Stokes and Fremont-Smith's article so much to heart, Kosinski invites even greater scrutiny of his intentions in creating this work. *Hermit's* extensive footnoting creates a feeling of tentativeness. In some sense, Kosinski is involved in a zero-sum game, effectively trying to save the village by burning it to the ground. With *Hermit*, Kosinski attempts to put a small nasty rumour to rest by turning it into a large nasty rumour. The reader must ask why Kosinski would choose to react in this fashion and whether this methodology had any possibility of rehabilitating his tattered reputation. Though this approach was not as successful as Kosinski might have wished (especially since it meant that virtually no one would ever read *Hermit*), it still provides a pretty good idea of the depth of Kosinski's funk as he wrote *Hermit*—and how much he felt was riding on this book.

Hermit's intertextual approach allows Kosinski to demonstrate how his writing was influenced by an incredibly diverse cross-section of humanity. The sources he employs in *Hermit* fall into four basic categories: 1) great writers and thinkers, 2) historical documents and famous figures (some of whom were his personal friends), 3) miscellaneous references to popular culture, and 4) spiritual and religious references. The first group includes writers such as Leo Tolstoi, George Orwell, Charles Dickens,

Tadeusz Borowski, Somerset Maugham, Joseph Conrad, Gore Vidal, Bernard Malmud, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mark Twain, Arthur Koestler, Victor Hugo, Aldous Huxley, Oscar Wilde, Henry David Thoreau, Franz Kafka, Charles Baudelaire, Truman Capote, Eugene Zamiatin, Sylvia Plath, Boris Pasternak, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Amos Oz, Vladimir Nabokov, Walt Whitman Pablo Neruda and Anaïs Nin. This group also includes philosophers such as Karl Popper, Michel Foucault, Fredrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, Georg Simmel, Herbert Marcuse, Theodore Adorno, Jurgen Habermas, Czeslaw Milosz, Isaiah Berlin, Jean-Paul Sartre, historians like Raul Hilberg and William Shirer, critics such as Jacques Derrida, Terry Eagleton, Roland Barthes, H.L. Mencken, Lionel Trilling, Northrop Frye, and important thinkers such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Marshall McLuhan and A. Alvarez.

The second grouping of sources includes historical figures such as Nikolai Bukharin, Joseph Goebbels, Heinrich Himmler, Emile Zola, Sigmund Freud, Anne Frank, William Randolph Hearst, Mahatma Gandhi, Pontius Pilate, Frédéric Chopin and Polish artist Bruno Schulz. In addition, Kosinski includes references to his friends and contemporaries: Jacob Javits, Peter Sellers, Diane Arbus and Byron Sherwin. Included in this second grouping are also references to Chaim Rumkowski's speeches, Arendt's evaluation of Eichmann's words at his trial, quotes from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, explanations of how the Judenrats functioned, excerpts from the *Haggadah* and some of Jacques Monod's thoughts. The third group, miscellaneous references to popular culture, includes a plethora of pornographic publications (e.g. *Uncut: The Magazine of the Natural Man*, *The Continuous Adventures of Dolly D-Cup*, *All Male Jock* magazine, *Leg Show* magazine and *Oriental Adult Woman* magazine), *The Boy Scout Handbook*, the *Partisan Review*, obscure publications (e.g. *Swedish-Jewish Weekly* and *American Toy* magazine), large circulation magazines (e.g. *New York* and *Life*) and contemporary films such as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. The fourth grouping is religious and spiritual. Kosinski cites

Jewish thinkers such as Martin Buber, Yehuda Halevi, Israel Bal Shem Tov, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Judah Levi Toba and Sabbatai Sevi. Kosinski also refers to a number of publications dealing with Tantra, yoga and Zen Buddhism.

Kosinski uses *Hermit's* intertextual structure to buttress his own point of view. For example, when he wishes to reflect on the damage done to his reputation by the scandal, he quotes George Orwell's explanation of how propaganda functions. And to denote how quickly rumours sometimes spread, Kosinski includes a quote from *The Great Gatsby.* Kosinski turns to Franz Kafka's *The Trial* to explain Kosky's feelings of despair. Kosky's distrust of the media is illustrated by a cynical quote first from William Randolph Hearst and later on, from Emile Zola. Indeed, Kosinski even finds a quote from Somerset Maugham to explain *Hermit's* alternative structure.

> **There are three rules for writing the novel. Unfortunately no one knows what they are. (Somerset Maugham)**[26] (Hermit, 45)

Hermit speaks through intertext. Devoid of plot, the book communicates by means of metaphor. No matter where Kosinski takes his story, someone else, in one form or another, has already been there. Kosinski never forgets this. He wishes readers to be aware of how much each author habitually borrows from other authors. When Kosky is murdered, Kosinski refers to the last line of Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*:

> **A wave slowly lifted him up. It came from afar and traveled sedately on, a shrug of eternity. (Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*)** (Hermit, 526)

[26]Bold type by Kosinski.

Because Koestler says it so well in his novel, Kosinski sees no reason to rework this material. Similarly, he does not wish to run the risk of trying to restate what Shakespeare has already put so succinctly:

> **Reputation, reputation, reputation! O I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. (*Othello*)**[27] (Hermit, 523)

There is an incredible despondency which underlies *Hermit.* Kosinski had spent the better part of two decades relating his stories to his readers: after the scandal, he seemed to have profound doubts about the wisdom of continuing to share this disturbing vision of the world. In his last years, Kosinski seemed to be operating out of a sense of desperation and frustration. He still needed to tell stories, but he was now looking for new methodologies by which to accomplish this end. *Hermit's* reliance on material produced by other people makes the book appear as a variation of Marcel Duchamp's 'readymade' art, in which previously produced objects are placed in a new context in order to create an entirely distinct meaning. The references to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel[28] (1907-1972), scattered throughout *Hermit,* are a case in point:

> **Judaism is neither an experience nor a creed, neither the possession of psychic traits nor the acceptance of a theological doctrine, but the living in a holy dimension, in a spiritual order, living in the covenant with God. (Abraham Joshua Heschel)** (Hermit, 523)

In a 1987 interview (prior to *Hermit's* publication), Kosinski stated that his interest in Heschel had to do with the rabbi's not "assigning too much importance, spiritually

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[27]Bold type by Kosinski.

[28]Like Kosinski, Heschel was also a transplanted Eastern European. After coming to the United States, he wrote a number of influential texts on Jewish mysticism and ethics including *Man is not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (1951), *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (1954) and *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1955).

speaking, to the period 1939-1945." (Leiderman 1987, 220) Heschel believed that it was the seminal nature of Jewish spirituality that should be celebrated. Kosinski argued in favour of this very same point in a number of interviews during the last years of his life and decided that Heschel's view was important enough to incorporate into the body of *Hermit*. In essence, Kosinski enhances his own arguments by showing that they are the distant cousins of what others had already written. It is not that Kosinski needs to do this because he is incapable of communicating his ideas to the reader (clearly he was a highly adept communicator), but he is instead acknowledging that another author had written about the concept prior to his discussion of it. At times, such as when he cites different histories of World War II prior to disclosing his own thoughts about how the survival experience affected his life, Kosinski is intending to be facetious.

> In its final form the decree—dated September 1, 1941—provided that Jews six years or over were to appear in public only when wearing the Jewish star. According to specification, the star had to be as large as the palm of a hand. Its color had to be black, the background yellow, and for the center of the star the decree prescribed the black inscription Jude. The victim was to sew the star tightly on the left front of his clothing. (Raul Hilberg, 1961)
> (Hermit, 44)

This sort of overkill is intentional. Kosinski cannot abide the charge that he was a plagiarizer. It flew in the face of everything for which he had ever stood. To avoid even the pretense that he might be borrowing, he immediately acknowledges each and every potential transgression before a misunderstanding can occur. Indeed, in *Hermit*, Kosinski seems to be asking why he should risk being caught stealing from obscure books like *The Career of Nikodem Dyzma* when he could simply acknowledge lines taken directly from *Othello*. The conclusion is obvious: whether acknowledged or not, this sort of thing—writing about what other authors have already covered—is an inherent part of

what writers do. Kosinski's point is that the standard by which he was judged by the *Village Voice* was not only unreasonable, but also unjust.

The anguish that Kosinski lived through in 1982 is probably beyond the average person's range of experience. *Hermit* brings readers closer to what Kosinski was feeling, but it never lets them totally inside. This is a deliberate choice on Kosinski's part. His sense of circumspection does not allow him to totally reveal himself. *Hermit's* voluminous sub-references make it difficult to focus on the book itself. The book's structure is incredibly distracting. It becomes difficult to find Kosky among all the intertextual chaos on each page. Kosinski keeps his readers at arm's length by never permitting them to see Kosky as a real protagonist. At times he seems more like a construct than a character. *Hermit* is not a book about him; it is more like a book into which he has been thrust. Like his creator, Kosky wishes to remain in control, but in *Hermit*, he has control of nothing except the book he has been writing. After the floating scandal becomes public, his entire attention turns to rehabilitating himself. It becomes his obsession. *Hermit* is the story of a man locked deep inside his own crisis—at times dispassionately observing it from the inside out and at other points suffering tremendously from what is being said about him. In the end, *Hermit* is effective in conveying Kosinski's overwhelming sense of dislocation. More than anything, he wants to proclaim his innocence, but he knows that no one is listening. The scandal has taken on a life of its own.

After the scandal, the rest of Kosinski's life was lived with a cloud hanging over his reputation. Even though he must have known it would not ultimately succeed, he nevertheless continued to write *Hermit*. Like his protagonist, dutifully working away on his book, in the end it may have been all he had left. *Hermit* was Kosinski's last opportunity to commute with his readers. In that sense, the book was a calculated gamble. He knew his intertextual approach would turn off many readers and critics, but

his need to clear his name superseded issues of coherence. *Hermit* is an attempt to restore Kosinski's reputation and to heal his wounded psyche. His strategy is to make the plagiarism charges appear absurd, by illustrating that all writers borrow. Unfortunately, this strategy works almost too well, since it is sometimes hard to tell where the sources end and Kosinski's work begins. In addition, Kosinski's peculiar habit of providing frustratingly incomplete citations (which frequently neglect to include the year of publication, the title of the work or the page number) makes it difficult to check the context of many of the references. Moreover, some of the quotes in *Hermit* are attributed to fictional characters. This brings the discussion back around to the whole notion of autofiction. *Hermit* is not supposed to be a textbook. It is something more unique: a metafictional memoir of a man's pain, despair, desperation and confusion as his worst nightmares play themselves out before his eyes—and he slowly realizes that he is powerless to influence the direction of his crisis.

Hermit's intertextual approach allows Kosinski to take the reader inside his own crisis. The various references to other people's work enhances the reader's understanding of how he saw himself and why the scandal so devastated his life. Taken together, the quotes and citations paint a picture of a vulnerable and frustrated man, unable to cope with the loss of his reputation. *Hermit* is an attempt to make sense of what he was forced to endure after 1982. The Kosinskian protagonist in this book is presented as being especially restive. Even embracing his Jewish identity does not seem to change anything for him. The situation as presented in *Hermit* is essentially irretrievable. Beyond his obsession with clearing his name, Kosky seems to have been emptied out. By the end of *Hermit*, when it is clear that no one will ever read *The Healer*, he realizes that his quest has been in vain. By this point he is a completely hollow man. The reputation in which he took great pride (and which was such an integral part of his identity) will never be restored. His overexposure in the media, both before and after the scandal, has rendered immaterial

any attestation of innocence. No one is willing to listen to anything that Kosky might have to say. And the worst part of all this is that Kosky is at least partially responsible for the predicament in which he finds himself. *The Healer* failed to change the widespread perception that there was some sinister ulterior motive underlying everything that Kosky does and says. Whatever small amount of credibility he still had was dissipated with its publication. Like *Hermit* itself, *The Healer* is designed to repel anyone who might be interested in reading it. The impact of his autofictional 'literary party' has been redirected. As a result, the protagonist ends up turning even further inward. *Hermit* attempts to convey the feelings and motivations of a man who has been deprived of all hope. As impotence supplants strength, he cannot help being overcome by bitterness. By the end of the book, the protagonist's death comes as something of a relief. He was in such discomfort and was so entirely convinced of the worthlessness of his own life that the reader cannot help feeling something akin to relief when Kosky is murdered. He somehow seems better off, not having to continue on, misunderstood, unloved and unappreciated.

SECTION IV - THE LEGACY OF JERZY KOSINSKI

Against his father's counsel, Jerzy Kosinski chose to live most of his life in the public eye. Indeed, everything he did during his adult life, including his eventual suicide, seemed designed to draw attention to himself. This exhibitionism, however, is only part of his story. There was also another part of Kosinski, the scared child, who lived in a constant state of paranoia and wished to withdraw into his own world, entirely apart from others. After his experiences in Europe, first under Nazism and then the communists, Kosinski had a difficult time trusting others. Almost instinctively, he attempted to withhold or distort inconvenient parts of his biography. For example, his marriage to Mary Weir was not terminated with her death from brain cancer in 1968 (as he had frequently suggested in publications such as *Vanity Fair*), but rather by a divorce that she had requested some

two years earlier.[29] Perhaps to protect himself, Kosinski had undertaken to create an alternative biography. Throughout his life, Kosinski enjoyed tinkering with his life story, as though he wanted to be sure than no one would ever know the precise details of his life. After reading his interviews, the reader is left with the sneaking suspicion that Kosinski is putting on a performance for the benefit of the interviewer. For example, in a 1979 interview with the *Times-Picayune*, Kosinski convinces the reporter that he is about to move to New Orleans to write a novel about Louisiana. (Blake 1979, 179) His well-known affinity for New York makes this story nothing short of bizarre.

Curiously, Kosinski told the truth about relatively unimportant—but often highly personal—matters (such as his intense interest in the lives of transsexuals), while he tended to equivocate on larger questions (such as whether or not he had been separated from his parents during the war). Kosinski's prevarications caught up with him all at once when the *Village Voice* uncovered several inconsistencies in what he had told interviewers about his life. Stokes and Fremont-Smith were systematic in their deconstruction of Kosinski, first presenting him as a liar to invalidate his credibility, before making allegations about his unconventional working methods, specifically his use of editors and sources. Being labeled as unreliable had the effect of negating even the possibility of denial: if Kosinski disputed the *Village Voice's* allegations, people would simply assume that he was up to his old tricks. The persona that he had carefully nurtured over the years was now in jeopardy. His entire career was predicated on the idea that he was the ultimate survivor. If this was not in fact the case, then to some degree he was marketing his work under false pretenses. This would tend to support the *Village Voice's* contention that Kosinski was not as forthcoming as he might have been regarding the details of his life. As his father had predicted years before, Kosinski's flamboyance had been his

[29]James Park Sloan reports that Mary Weir died from a lethal combination of barbiturates and alcohol. (Sloan 1996, 261)

undoing. Had he not been so prominent, it is unlikely that anyone would have bothered to investigate his life. Never held to account for his most outrageous claims, Kosinski had grown overconfident. Sycophantic articles such as Barbara Gelb's "Being Jerzy Kosinski" in the *New York Times Magazine*, did not help matters. These sorts of pieces, in which Kosinski effectively seduced the writer into repeating verbatim all his tallest tales, seemed to particularly enrage his detractors, thereby hastening the possibility of a scandal. In retrospect, Kosinski's understanding of how he was perceived by his critics was astonishingly fanciful.

In the period between 1979 and 1988, Kosinski's life underwent tremendous upheaval. The harsh criticism of his fiction had accelerated and his confidence gradually weakened. His own mid-life crisis could not help but affect his writing. In the last three novels, for example, he retreats entirely from the notion of reintegration, a major theme in *Blind Date*. Throughout that novel, Levanter is shown taking care of his ailing wife, being supportive of his friend, Jacques Monod (during his last hours) and bringing Pauline to orgasm for the first time in her life. In contrast, Fabian, Domostroy and Kosky are played out, vulnerable and beaten down by life. *Passion Play*, *Pinball* and *Hermit* complete the life cycle of the Kosinskian protagonist. The main characters of these books have ostensibly given up on the idea of healing themselves. They are men devoid of hope, their attention focused on the more immediate matter of their personal crises. The cocksure protagonists of the first novels have all but vanished. In their stead is an inherently more desperate version of the Kosinskian man. Up until *Passion Play*, Kosinski's protagonists tended to be energetic, self-employed adventurers, like Tarden and Levanter. The last Kosinskian men are in a different stage of development: they are clearly Kosinskian heroes, but they are ambivalent about their lives. The future is something they view with trepidation. As their prospects grow ever more precarious, their usual self-assurance recedes. Fabian, for example, was once an extraordinarily talented athlete, but by the time the reader

encounters him in *Passion Play*, his best days are long behind him. For the majority of the novel, Fabian seems to be engaged in a (losing) battle against his own deterioration. His financial situation is equally dire, and he subsists from match to match, never knowing if he will be defeated and lose everything. Even his approach to relationships is filled with ambivalence: in place of true intimacy, he prefers brief affairs with teenaged girls, whom he initiates into adulthood.

In *Pinball*, Domostroy finds himself in a similar situation. A once renowned musician, he has lost the will to compose and is nearly destitute as a result. He lives exclusively for the moment, never planning very far ahead. In every sense, he is a washout. Domostroy survives by doing odd jobs, including helping another character devise a plan to ensnare Goddard, a reclusive rock star. There is never a point in *Pinball* where Domostroy seems to be in control. Instead, what happens to him is dictated exclusively by Andrea, the mysterious young woman who seeks out his services to locate Goddard. Domostroy's creative impotence has left him feeling vulnerable and despondent. It may have been that this novel was motivated by the general direction that Kosinski felt his life was headed—that all his best novels were written and published years before. Kosinski spent nearly six years creating an autofiction he called *The Hermit of 69th Street*. In *Hermit*, in what he must have been aware would be his last book, Kosinski appears to be speaking more to future biographers and academics than to casual readers. He was convinced that his best response to the *Village Voice's* charges would be to create something entirely new, a book that was clearly his and his alone. Though Kosinski chose not to respond to the allegations raised by Stokes and Fremont-Smith at that time, the scandal itself seems to inform every aspect of *Hermit*. It is a response to the events in Kosinski's life. This autofictional experiment, which Kosinski considered essential in putting the charges to rest (or at least reframing the allegations) required him to take certain chances, the most

important of which required him to reveal more of himself than he had ever dared to in his previous work.

In the end, Kosinski could not abide the notion that he was not the sole creator of his novels. *Hermit* takes the reader into the author's confidence. It is a last stand of sorts, in which Kosinski tries to vindicate himself by revealing the exact manner by which he sets out to write a novel. That his writing was informed by other authors is the only point that Kosinski is willing to concede to Stokes and Fremont-Smith. Rather than apologize for this, however, Kosinski celebrates it. In Norbert Kosky's working papers, history, fiction, memory and biography are permitted to commingle. The book is a labyrinth of quotes and footnotes taken from hundreds of disparate sources. Kosinski's point is that all writers borrow from the work of other authors. More than anything, Kosinski wished to dispel the notion that he lacked the talent to create his own novels. He was especially distressed by the idea that his editors were solely responsible for his success. *Hermit* is Kosinski's attempt to be remembered for something beside the 1982 scandal.

In order to fully appreciate it, the reader should be aware that *Hermit* was conceived and written during the last tumultuous years of Kosinski's life. It is made to appear as an unfinished work, stopped before it could be culled together into a novel. In the opening pages, Kosinski warns—in his official role as the book's literary executor—that future editions of *Hermit* will include new material (discovered too late to be incorporated into the first edition of this book). Designed to impede the reader's progress at every turn, it is deliberately frustrating to read. Rather than uplift or inform or entertain, it instead seeks to perplex and dishearten its readers. It is atypical of Kosinski to care so little about his readers. In past books, they seemed to be his primary concern. But *Hermit* is another matter. It is a book about process rather than plot. It lacks a compelling storyline, is filled with terrible puns, includes rambling quotes and frequently goes off on long tangents.

Still, what it lacks in continuity, it more than makes up for in intimacy. Kosinski's experimental book provides a uniquely 'writerly' perspective. The reader is inside his mind, watching his thoughts as they coalesce into a book. However, this is not the book that Kosky would have written, had he lived. *Hermit* is his working papers: his citations, footnotes, comments, puns, ruminations and so forth, some of which would have become part of the finished book, but most of which would have been rewritten or discarded. *Hermit* is motivated by a high calling: the fusion of life and art. Kosinski wanted to create a book whose origins would never be challenged. Conversely, he wanted his readers to recognize that *Hermit* was not created in isolation, that it—like all books—builds on the work of other authors. At certain moments, it feels like a novel, yet at other times it is more like a memoir. It also includes elements of nonfiction, such a bibliographical references. It is up to each reader to decide for himself or herself whether or not this experiment in form was ultimately successful.

Kosinski's final three books chart the devolution of the Kosinskian protagonist. The vulnerable characters he writes about in *Passion Play*, *Pinball* and *Hermit* seem to be reflections of Kosinski's own state of mind during this period. As the unfavourable reviews of his work multiplied, Kosinski gradually began to lose confidence in his capacity to produce important work or at least to get a fair shake from reviewers. The scandal crystallized this process of internal reappraisal. In these last books he seems to be questioning everything, including whether or not there is any point in continuing to share his own dark vision of the world through his novels. Kosinski had become so much more famous than his work, and his work had been so thoroughly vilified by any number of different publications, that he felt he had to begin communicating in a new form. Since he had already begun work on *Hermit* prior to the scandal, Kosinski decided to rework and vastly expand his novel. He understood that *Hermit* could not be written in his traditional fragmented or '*Steps*-type' style. It had to be audacious, so it would be noticed, and it had

to communicate with those most inclined to believe the disturbing points raised by the *Village Voices* article. It could leave no doubt that Kosinski was its creator and it had to acknowledge, in a way no one could possibly ignore, that its creation had been informed by a vast variety of eclectic sources. *Hermit* becomes an act of defiance, Kosinski's way of thumbing his nose at his detractors and making them understand that they have misjudged him. Kosky's story is very nearly indistinguishable from Kosinski's own.

In *Hermit*, Kosky's notoriety leads directly to his downfall. Only too late, he realizes that the outrageous persona he adopted in public, trying to stimulate interest in his novels, was to be his undoing. From his books, people are convinced that they know the intimate details of his private life. When two reporters write an article about Kosky accusing him of being a fraud, public opinion quickly goes against him. The scandal continues to haunt him throughout the rest of the book. His novel, *The Healer*, is designed to challenge the popular perception of him as a fraud and a cheat by taking the reader on a tour of his creative mind. Unfortunately, the plan fails. Everyone already seems to have made up their minds about Kosky. Like Mary-Jane Kirkland's friend in *Blind Date*, who distrusts Levanter precisely because he is so congenial, people tend to wonder about Kosky. Does he have some sinister secret that he is hiding? Is he writing about his own experiences? How could he have failed to appreciate that having such a high profile life would eventually lead to his coming under heavy media scrutiny? Over the years, his appearances in the media have confused matters even further. According to the publicity director of his publishing house, Kosky was so convincing in the role of Bukharin in *Total State* that people could not accept that he has not been acting his entire adult life.

> "...Many of us thought you weren't acting at all, that all you did was to become yourself—the cold and cruel Norbert Kosky we have already met in your books." (Hermit, 435)

The identity ascribed to him by others has now supplanted his actual self. Kosky feels frustration, which eventually gives way to apathy. This sense of impending defeat hovers over each of the last three protagonists. Nothing ever seems to go their way for very long. They have a hard time trusting others and see relationships as inherently dangerous. Permitting others to become intimate with them, especially over long periods of time, leaves them feeling exposed. As a result, these last protagonists move further and further into seclusion. Effectively disconnected from society, the last Kosinskian men are surprisingly set in their ways and often manifest oddly fetishistic behaviour. Fabian, for example, frequently acts out in ways that are both childish and ultimately self-defeating. Despite the advice of his friends and publishers, he insists on writing about a side of equitation—the inherent danger of the sport—that interests few readers and leads to plummeting sales figures. His incapacity to compromise is directly responsible for the marginalization of his work. Fabian spends a good deal of the novel defending what he has written to his detractors. This approach seems to guarantee his isolation from other people. Even when someone wishes to know Fabian better, he does everything he can to forestall intimacy. For example, when Vanessa inquires as to why Fabian never uses his first name, his response, that "most people can't pronounce it," seems more like an evasion than an answer. (PP, 229)[30] Being on a first name basis would tend to negate the emotional distance he tries to put between himself and others, including Vanessa.

The previous incarnations of the Kosinskian protagonist, prior to the last novels, tended to be men of action, who would instinctively take matters into their own hands. Tarden, for example, saw life as a zero sum game: if he was not controlling and manipulating others, he felt that he would eventually be controlled and manipulated by them. Tarden wished to shape events rather than be shaped by them and he protected himself by

[30]On another level, Jerzy Kosinski is giving a wink to the reader since throughout his life, people tended to mispronounce his first name.

creating layers of identity, which he could later discard, if need be. The last Kosinskian men are entirely different sorts of protagonists. In *Passion Play*, when Fabian fills in for another rider during a show jumping competition at Madison Square Garden, he wonders how the audience will react to him:

> He could not know whether the audience would take his attempt as gallantry or insult, if they would be vocal in their anger and displeasure with the arrogance of a horseman flaunting his ineptitude on such a formidable national stage. (PP, 261)

To be sure, this is not the cocksure protagonist who the reader has become accustomed to seeing in Kosinski's work. A protagonist like Fabian must content himself with merely surviving from moment to moment without humiliating himself, whereas Tarden wished to be the puppet-master, pulling the strings of everyone around him. Compared to Tarden, Fabian's concerns tend to be prosaic. He worries about whether his failing body might force him to forfeit a match or whether his VanHome will eventually be repossessed. Fabian understands that his talent can only take him so far. As his skills continue to deteriorate, he may well lose everything. His writing does not produce anywhere near enough income to survive. He is not the master of his destiny. At one point, Fabian is employed by the reactionary dictator of a Latin American country called Los Lemures. After El Benefactor, as the dictator is known, ruthlessly disposes of an opposition journalist—by arranging for the man to have an unfortunate encounter with a poisonous spider—Fabian challenges the dictator. El Benefactor appears bemused by Fabian's haughtiness and then explains why he has not bothered to have Fabian killed as well:

> "You're just a one-on-one amateur in whatever you do, Fabian. You will always be just an amateur." Nobody in Los Lemures would bother to waste a good tarantula on you!" (PP, 122)

The Kosinskian protagonist is no longer a man on the rise. The only people who still treat him with respect are veritable children, the adolescent girls he hopes to seduce. Fabian knows that his adult acquaintances, by and large, see him as a buffoon. He is a man of no consequence. In *Pinball*, Domostroy is viewed similarly. He has no prospects and takes jobs that are far beneath his station as an acclaimed composer. His old friends have largely abandoned him. And even his relationship with Andrea is essentially a financial transaction in which she agrees to provide sexual favours in return for Domostroy's help flushing Goddard out of his New Atlantis. This version of the Kosinskian protagonist is no longer a womanizer: in fact, most members of the opposite sex seem to want nothing to do with him. In *Pinball*, it is Andrea who aggressively manipulates others to get what she wants. Men want her. She has complete sexual freedom and outside the bedroom, she does not readily defer to Domostroy's wishes. In many ways, she has supplanted Domostroy and assumed the traditional role of the Kosinskian man, the aggressive character who always gets his way. In contrast, Domostroy's confidence is shot. Deep down he knows that he will not produce any significant recordings in the years to come. After enduring years of scathing criticism from his critics, he simply loses the desire to compose.

Norbert Kosky is also a broken man. When the protagonist's autofictional text fails to capture the public's attention, it finally dawns on him that his side of the story will never be known. As people quickly lose interest in his life, he knows that the popular perception of him as a fraud will never be seriously challenged. No matter what he says or writes, people believe that he is lying. His defense, that he is no more or less guilty of being a charlatan than anybody else, rings hollow. Autofiction, the place between memoir and make-believe, which Kosky sees as his salvation, comes across to the reader as an arcane abstraction. Nobody is listening to anything he has to say. In the end, his book, *The Healer,* does not heal anyone, least of all Kosky himself. The scandal has had the

effect of extracting Kosky's "literary teeth" while simultaneously diluting the blackness of his vision—by picking out his "literary blackhead[s]." (Hermit, 351 & 386) Kosky's credibility as a writer has been compromised, at least in part by his overexposure in the media. With his self-esteem damaged beyond repair and everyone seemingly against him, Kosky turns inward. His life appears as one big no-win situation. Near the end of *Hermit*, Kosky describes himself to another character as "an artist of creative despair." (Hermit, 473) He becomes convinced that whatever he produces or says is somehow going to be twisted for the purpose of damaging his integrity. Continually browbeaten in this manner, his withdrawal from the company of other people is not hard to understand. Kosky sees himself as being alone, seemingly against the whole world.

In order to be fully appreciated, *Hermit* must be read in the context of both Kosinski's prior work, as well as the anguish that the *Village Voice* piece personally caused him during the last few years of his life. It is not so much an autobiography as a rough self-portrait of the author. Kosky's story shares much in common with Kosinski's own. In this last book, a version of Kosinski's personal crisis is recreated for the reader—so that others might begin to understand some of what he went through after the publication of the *Village Voice* story. The scandal clearly pervaded Kosinski's every waking thought during the writing of *Hermit*. Indeed, Kosinski's indignation is palpable throughout the text. The main character he creates, an older novelist of some renown, spends the book reflecting upon the patent unfairness of what he has been forced to endure. *Hermit* is designed to tell Kosinski's side of the story, while at the same time putting to rest the idea that his novels might have been cobbled together by editors. With his reputation in tatters after 1982, Kosinski may have perceived that he was back on the outside looking in. In *Hermit*, Kosky's friend Cesare inquires about his refusal to reply to the difficult questions being raised about his fiction: "What are you—still a little war-kid?" (Hermit, 471) This question is telling. In Kosinski's book, Kosky subsists on two planes: the persecuted

youngster he once was and the tormented adult who is just going through the motions of his post-Holocaust life. Between the two worlds, however, Kosinski singles out the Lódz ghetto as Kosky's true emotional home. (Hermit, 123) Spiritually at least, he never moves very far from the hellish world of his childhood.

Like his creator, Kosky never forgets the horrors he witnessed during the war. Uppermost in his mind is the notion that he may have to run away again, as he once did as a child. This need to think in terms of protecting his life becomes a phobia. Again, like Kosinski himself, Kosky insists on keeping a comet in the trunk of his car. On some level, Kosky is aware that there is a compulsive element to his behaviour, that his psyche has been deformed by his earliest experiences. Throughout *Hermit*, Kosky reexamines the impact of the war on his life. In a speculative exchange with his father, he asks "What Is Wrong With Me?" His father's answer takes the form of something approaching a mea culpa:

> "Nothing," [his father] declares after a pause. Like millions of other children, you were first wronged by the War. Millions of Jewish children, Polish children, Russian, Greek, Gypsy and even German children. Second, like thousands of other kids, you went *speakless* [sic] for a while. Ask [psychology] Professor Stefan Szuman. He knows more silent kids silenced from within by the War—who want to write or draw—than just about anybody." (Hermit, 308)

Kosinski's last book is a stream of consciousness, in which he invites the reader inside his own survival experience. It seems certain that virtually every moment of the rest of his life was impacted in some way by his wartime childhood. According to James Park Sloan, Kosinski's work always returns to the same question: what happens when the individual comes into conflict with society? Sloan argues that in Kosinski's novels, even the Holocaust is portrayed not so much as an "attack on a group but as...an attack on the

integrity of the self." (Sloan 1994, 48) In *Hermit*, Kosinski explores the ephemeral nature of fame. More than most, he was aware that there was a price to be paid for notoriety. His fame and iconoclastic lifestyle made him a particularly convenient target. It is significant that in *Hermit*, Kosky is attacked from behind and murdered. Kosinski may have seen the *Village Voice* scandal in similar terms, as an unnecessary and unjust defilement of his reputation. By the end of his life, Kosinski grew to see his fame as a burden. In his work, identity is often portrayed as a liability. Nondescript characters, such as Goddard in *Pinball*, Serena in *Blind Date* and Chance in *Being There*, represent the Kosinskian ideal of total freedom. These characters, defined entirely by their lack of any known identity (in Chance's case because he has none), are able to keep their lives strictly compartmentalized. Ironically, Kosinski understood the value of anonymity relatively early in his career. His two nonfiction texts were published under the pen name Joseph Novak. Even before the *Village Voice* scandal, in *Pinball*, Kosinski conceives invisibility as the ultimate defensive weapon. Goddard's music is distributed to millions of listeners, yet no one knows who he is. He is able to keep his work separate from his personal life. He enjoys all the benefits of fame without having to suffer any of its inevitable consequences. By the end of his life, Kosinski may have wished that he too could have kept his books separate from his life.

Perhaps to throw people off and to otherwise induce them to doubt what they already thought they knew of his life, Kosinski frequently embellished the details of his own biography. According to his friend Mira Michalowska, Kosinski was "an absolute mythomaniac." (Sloan 1994, 53) He seemed to believe that the more people knew about him, the more vulnerable he would be. As a result, he chose to engage in a schizophrenic pattern of deliberate distortion, followed by partial clarification. His truth and exaggerations had been commingled with such proficiency that by the end of his life, Kosinski himself may not have been able to determine where his biography left off and

his embellishments began. He wished to remain an enigma. The reason for Kosinski's success in obfuscating the exact details of his life has to do with repetition. By recapitulating his alternative history ad nauseam (e.g. that his mother was a concert pianist or that his first wife had died of cancer), his exaggerations were absorbed into the established facts of his life (e.g. he had been born in Poland in 1933). Sadly, this basic premise, that innuendo can very rapidly overtake established fact, was also at the root of Kosinski's downfall. In short, the competing alternative histories were in conflict with one another. Kosinski's unwillingness (or perhaps inability) to be straightforward about his life undermined the credibility of any response he could have had to the *Village Voice* article. The *New York Times'* response, on his behalf, had the net effect of magnifying the scandal. According to James Park Sloan, "instead of quelling the accusations against Kosinski, it served to give them new life, and on a wider stage." (Sloan 1996, 393)

Even Kosinski's favourite argument, that human memory is entirely selective, and is itself a sort of fictionalization, seemed like a very convenient rationalization of the way Kosinski had chosen to live his life. Like Tomek, the young Ruthenian boy whom Tarden terrorizes in *Cockpit*, Kosinski was ultimately powerless to make anyone believe his side of the story. In *Hermit*, the reader can feel Kosinski's frustration and anger. What Kosinski needed to assert, and somehow never could, was that he did employ editors, but that his novels were nonetheless his. (Sloan 1996, 441) Like the protagonist of *The Painted Bird*, when he tells the orphanage administrators that his parents were killed in an air raid (when he actually has no idea what happened to them), Kosinski seemed determined to try to pass off a history he wished could have been true, but he knew was not. The success of Kosinski's work was due in part to his capacity to keep the reader guessing. In other words, it was often hard to tell how much of a given protagonist was based on Kosinski himself. This compounded any potential rehabilitation, since anyone who had read his novels felt that they were already well acquainted with Kosinski—and if

he was at all like his protagonists, then he was capable of anything, including equivocating about the assistance he received in the production of his novels.

The irony was that after spending so much of his adult life hiding parts of his biography from the public—in the mistaken belief that truth could be supplanted by perception—in the end, Stokes and Fremont-Smith devastated his life using a similar methodology. After the publication of their piece, events took on a life of their own and it no longer mattered so much what the truth was. Kosinski's name would always be associated with the *Village Voice* scandal. In *Vanity Fair*, Stephen Schiff describes Kosinski's life as having a "curiously symmetrical trajectory," in which he survives "the great European cataclysm of the Holocaust" only to be destroyed by a "peculiarly American, peculiarly personal" tragedy. (Schiff 1988, 117) Kosinski's life ended where it had begun: as a victim. His description of the boy in *The Painted Bird* as never enjoying so much as "a moment's peace," (PB, 90) eventually became an accurate description of his own life. The rage and helplessness of his childhood, as expressed in *The Painted Bird*, recurs in his last three books. The Kosinskian protagonist, who had so often objectified others in the earlier novels, was now himself being maligned and maltreated.

The reader can plainly see Kosinski's state of mind in his final work. Indeed, James Park Sloan describes *Hermit* "as a prolonged moment of death, in which the author's life, factual and fictional, flashes before his eyes." (Sloan 1996, 411) *Hermit* was indeed Kosinski's magnum opus, where he demonstrates that "while their books are dead, writers never die. They reincarnate through other people's writing about them." (Sloan 1996, 406)[31] In the future, Kosinski hoped that his work might be discussed and evaluated on

[31] Jerzy Kosinski was very proud of his books and often referred to them as his children. He was adamant that whatever he might have had to say was already included in these books. Clearly, he appreciated that some of the people who would eventually write about him (your humble narrator being but one) would not have had personal contact with him. So his wish was that readers closely examine the contents of his novels, a task which I have endeavoured to accomplish here and in previous chapters.

its merits. He wrote *Hermit* because it was unthinkable for him that he might be remembered (and redefined) solely on the basis of what Stokes and Fremont-Smith had written about him. At one point in *Hermit*, when a television producer tries to convince Norbert Kosky to be interviewed on the evening news, his answer is particularly Kosinskian. "People can find out how I think from my books," he answers. (Hermit, 358) The message here is unambiguous: Kosinski felt his publications revealed his inner self far more accurately than any profiles of him in the media. This is perhaps Kosinski's greatest strength as a writer: he was willing to take risks in the production of his novels. *Hermit* tackles the humiliating final years of Kosinski's life and reveals what was left of his life in the aftermath of the scandal. The reader is invited inside the mind of a protagonist whose life is being publicly and systematically torn apart. In *Hermit*, Kosinski's fear, angst, paranoia and anger are all on display. For good or ill, this was his life after 1982, as he tried to live down the scandal. While it is impossible to know the exact toll that the scandal took on his life, it is clear that Kosinski was never again the man he had been prior to the publication of the *Village Voice* article.

The way in which Kosinski had lived his life had caught up with him. His notoriety made him a target for those who wished to belittle his work and were jealous of his remarkable early success. His outrageous stories, dubious claims, obfuscatory manner, deliberate equivocations, interest in deviant sexual practices and ever evolving biography were very disconcerting to those with more mundane existences. Clearly Kosinski's life was already far more outrageous than any fiction. Why he always felt it necessary to embellish was unclear. His vocation probably had something to do with this: he spent so much of his life making up fascinating stories, he may have fallen into the habit of spinning tall tales in order to make himself stand out from the crowd. Beyond his calling as a novelist, however, Kosinski's childhood is clearly the most vital single factor in understanding his compulsion to enhance the details of his life. One way or another, even if he had never

been physically separated from his parents during the war, it is clear that Kosinski carried the war within his consciousness. It occupied his imagination in a way that people who did not survive the Holocaust would find difficult to comprehend. In his first novel, Kosinski writes about a child who spends his time wishing he were someone else, dreaming of being in control of what happens to him. After the war, the boy and the Silent One send a trainload of peasants over a cliff, merely to demonstrate that they are no longer powerless to take revenge on their oppressors. What he had lived through had clearly shaken the young Jerzy Kosinski to the core of his being. He seems to have gone through the rest of his life feeling damaged or incomplete or deficient in some way. His writing was his way of connecting with others, while his pursuit of fame was a way of redressing his own feelings of inferiority. His need for acceptance was difficult for him to satiate. Public adulation may have been the only way he could feel fully loved and appreciated. Kosinski's work might then be seen as a sort of wish fulfillment. It allowed him to go other places (e.g. the very heights of power, in *Being There*), be other people (e.g. a young billionaire in *The Devil Tree*), try unusual occupations (e.g. a secret agent in *Cockpit*) and have unique experiences (e.g. possessing world-class athletic skills in *Passion Play*).

An overdeveloped instinct for survival led Kosinski to continually massage the exact details of his life. In order to better suit the moment in which he found himself, he would attempt to be deliberately provocative or alternately, to tell people whatever he knew they wanted him to say. Again, there seems to be a sense of self-loathing that underlies such behaviour. This was not the conduct of a man who was wholly satisfied with his own life. He seems to want to change who he was by manipulating how he was perceived. This wish to control how others saw him was a recurring theme in Kosinski's life. He feared the idea of any one person knowing too much about the exact details of his life. Through his behaviour, he sought to keep others at arm's length. His books also played a

role here. People could never be entirely sure if the bleak landscape of his novels was an act of invention or a blueprint to explain the world as he experienced it. Kosinski himself made any distinction even more difficult by frequently including characters in his fiction who were either personal friends (e.g. composer Boris Pregel in *Pinball*) or celebrities (e.g. Charles Lindbergh in *Blind Date*). In any case, it is safe to say that Kosinski's survival experience informed all of his writing. In *Hermit*, another character describes Kosky's novels as "depicting a world that is treacherous and dangerous." (Hermit, 450) Like the protagonist of his 1988 book (as well as many survivors), Kosinski appears to have suffered from a sense of dislocation from the world around him. Long after the Nazi defeat, the Total State seemed to live on inside the wounded psyche of each of his protagonists.

On *Controversy!*, Dustin Borell, Kosky's old editor, characterizes his friend as a man who "was cracked and made decrepit by the Second World War. He chronicles sin, isolation and fear: his World War II nightmare fused with our own American urban nightmare." (Hermit, 450) In the end, this characterization of Kosky applies equally well to Kosinski himself. Toward the end of his life, Kosinski felt that a great disservice had been done to his reputation. He set out to dispel the notion that all it took to create his novels was a talented editor. Kosinski wished to reaffirm that his work was his own and that while his fame had helped to sell many copies of his books, in the end it was the unconventional stories being told inside these books which made them so compelling. By the time he produced *Hermit*, however, the controversy over the *Village Voice* article had faded from memory. It was too little, and far too late. The public had no interest in and even less patience for autofiction—or at least Kosinski's version of it. *Hermit* had been his most ambitious undertaking, but it was largely ineffective in changing public perceptions.

Ironically, Kosinski's most important contributions to literature came early in his career. His conception of the painted bird as the ultimate Holocaust metaphor and his notion of the self as montage (life represented as random bits of memory and experience) which he first employed in *Steps*, seem destined to endure. *Hermit* is significant for entirely different reasons. It is a useful overview of how Kosinski saw his own life, in the last years. In addition, it is a means of trying to mend his wounded pride. *Hermit's* footnotes may not have been worth the price of admission, as Kosinski had promised, but the book is nevertheless valuable insofar as it affords an all too rare glimpse of Kosinski's own take on the scandal. He shows the reader the sorts of indignities to which he was subjected after the publication of the *Village Voice* piece. Observing the final Kosinskian man suffering through his most difficult and uncomfortable incarnation, one cannot help but reflect on the devastating impact of Stokes and Fremont-Smith's article on Kosinski's life.

As his father had predicted years before, his pursuit of fame had been his undoing. Kosinski was back to where he had started, a hapless victim of circumstance, incapable of securing the acceptance or trust of those around him. Unable to repair the damage that had been done to his stature in the literary community, he may have become convinced that nothing short of his own death could save him from spending the rest of his life answering scurrilous questions about the authorship of his books. He wished to be remembered for his novels, not for his pivotal role in a humiliating literary controversy. On May 3, 1991, Jerzy Kosinski permanently excused himself from responding to any further questions about his work. From this date forward, *The Hermit of 69th Street: The Working Papers of Norbert Kosky*, would have to speak for him. If people wanted to know about the last years of his life or the scandal that devastated his reputation, they would have no choice but to consult Kosinski's autofictional novel. For many critics and readers, this remains Kosinski's most underhanded prank.

EPILOGUE

Jerzy Kosinski's life—and by extension his work—was the result of an unusual confluence of political and social events. Some might even argue that it was a quintessential twentieth century life. He was born in 1933 and passed the war years as a child in hiding in Poland. Whether or not he had been abandoned, the experience of living as a Jew in the Polish countryside, constantly in fear of discovery, must have been the most traumatic ordeal that a young child could possibly undergo. As James Park Sloan has stated, "the Kosinski family would have needed only a suspicion of what was happening in the country around them to live in mortal dread." (Sloan 1994, 52-53) The young Kosinski's first memories of life would be of living a lie, praying that his real identity would not be discovered. From this early age onward, he appears to have viewed his personal details as something that he could manipulate whenever necessary, in order to either please or entertain others or simply to protect himself when he felt that he was in danger. After the liberation of Poland by the Red Army, the adolescent Kosinski and his family, like so many others, were grateful to the Soviets—and Stalin in particular. They strongly believed in the promise of State Socialism. As the years went by, however, they grew disillusioned. Frustrated by his day to day life in Poland, Kosinski reached a difficult decision. He was an individualist living in a collectivist society and he longed to experience the wider world. In Poland, even his photographs, many of the female nude, were said to be "harboring dangerous bourgeois tendencies" antithetical to the goals of the Party. (Taylor 1991, 29) Kosinski knew that he would never thrive in such a stifling atmosphere. Everything about him, from his outspokenness to his need to shock and outrage others, did not jibe well with the Poland of the 1950s. To be sure, it was no place for an iconoclast.

A year after the Soviets put down the Hungarian uprising, Kosinski left Poland to study in the United States. He would not return for almost thirty years. In America, Kosinski was determined to do all the things that were forbidden to him in Poland. He could expatiate his true feelings, even if they were politically unpopular. He could live and work where he wished. He could learn and write about anything which interested him. In short, he was no longer a painted bird. On the contrary, New York was a city of painted birds. It was here that Kosinski perfected the art of reinvention. He thrived in America, becoming a successful essayist and later, a widely known novelist. He became friendly with many famous people, taught at Ivy League universities, acted in a movie, regularly appeared on nationally syndicated talk shows and married a wealthy widow. In 1979, in a piece for *U.S. News & World Report*, Kosinski described his feelings in the following way:

> After 20 years of my American existence, preceded by just about as many years of surviving under the Nazi-Soviet dictatorships, I still experience that shock [of freedom] every morning. Here I am, a mere speck of humanity—still free to live my day as I choose, free to take sole responsibility for the acts of my life. (JK 1979, 52)

Kosinski spent the majority of his adult life selling himself to the American public. On television, he was a dashing and captivating figure, spinning fascinating yarns, always punctuated by some intriguing twist. He was a truly gifted storyteller. In some odd way, his incredible imagination contributed to his downfall. His greatest strength as a novelist, a seemingly endless faculty for invention, turned out to be a serious liability. Once *The Village Voice* exposed a number of his eccentricities and inconsistencies, everything Kosinski had worked so hard to achieve began to unravel. His reputation would never fully recover. Years before, Kosinski's father had warned him that it was better to live

unnoticed than to be the centre of attention. It is hard not to marvel at the prescience and relevance of this remark, especially viewed in light of Kosinski's eventual suicide in 1991.

Only time will tell whether the scandal and his subsequent suicide are all that will be remembered when the name Jerzy Kosinski is mentioned. Twenty years after the *Village Voice* piece first appeared, one thing seems clear: the plethora of negative media coverage which resulted was out of all proportion with the transgressions that Geoffrey Stokes and Eliot Fremont-Smith had alleged that Kosinski had committed. Today, Kosinski remains a profoundly misunderstood man. In addition, he is underrated as an author. The works of fiction that he created, especially in the early part of his career, continue to be read. *The Painted Bird* is a startlingly original and moving book, a classic of Holocaust fiction. The book's staying power seems to be related to the universality of its central metaphor: at some point, everyone knows what it feels like to be an unwanted outsider. Kosinski's first novel was part of an initial wave of 1960s literature which redefined the Holocaust as the central event of World War II. Kosinski's second novel, *Steps*, won the 1969 National Book Award and also seems destined to be remembered. In this experimental novel, Kosinski provides the reader only brief fragments selected from the lifetime of one survivor and arranged at random, interspersed with a running dialogue between a man and a woman. The protagonist of *Steps* is a man who has been shattered by his survival experience. He can never really regain what has been taken from him. It seems that Kosinski saw himself as being similarly afflicted.

No matter where he traveled or what activities he participated in or how famous he became, Jerzy Kosinski saw himself, first and foremost, as a survivor. His wartime life did not end with the defeat of the Nazis or his emigration from Poland. What he experienced and how he felt during the war years lived on inside him and affected his life, regardless of where he found himself. This is discussed at length in Kosinski's magnum

opus, *The Hermit of 69th Street*, and is also present as a subtext in most of the other novels. Clearly the war and survival were very much on Kosinski's mind throughout his life: still, they were not his only contexts. They were merely the most important ones. The way in which he lived his life—constantly modifying his life story—and the type of fiction he chose to create—of men obsessed with control—were his responses to what he had lived through. It goes without saying that not all survivors felt as Kosinski did. "I lived through the war too, but it never occurred to me to throw bricks at people," his friend Musia Schwartz remarked.[1] "I always believed that Kosinski was haunted, driven even, by a kind of demonic energy," she said. "The war affected him, of course, but it is impossible for us to know to what degree his bleak assessment of humanity was related to his earliest childhood experiences."[2] What is clear, however, is that Kosinski felt compelled to write, over and over, about protagonists who had been badly deformed by what they had lived through. Whether Kosinski felt this way about his own life is not entirely clear. It is possible that his writing was an outlet for these sorts of feelings.

Kosinski seemed to have perceived his post-war life, in America, within the broader context of his survival. In a sense, his life in Eastern Europe, during the war years and after, was a dress rehearsal for his life as a novelist. His two nonfiction books which critiqued State Socialism from the inside out, served a similar purpose, sharpening Kosinski's critical faculties. Much of his work after *The Painted Bird* demonstrates Kosinski's understanding of his adopted country's problems. His critique of America, as a culturally vapid and politically immature society, is every bit as unfavourable as anything he had to say about Eastern Europe. Indeed, Chance and Jonathan Whalen, Kosinski's only American born protagonists, do not leave a lot of room for optimism for America's future. Though Kosinski was understandably thankful for the opportunities he enjoyed in

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[1]This is a reference to an incident in *The Painted Bird* in which the boy is manhandled by a theatre attendant and later attempts to drop bricks on the man from a staircase.
[2]Discussion with Musia Schwartz about the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski, Montreal, 10 June 1998.

America, in contrast to the life he might have lived in Poland, he knew that this was at odds with his life as a writer. He could never play favourites. To him, being a novelist meant conveying to his readers the world as he experienced it, without prejudice:

> I see myself as an adversary novelist whose role is to confront—not to escape from—life's threatening encounters. (JK 1979, 53)

In this at least, Kosinski seems to have succeeded. He never shied away from controversial matters. On the contrary, he welcomed them, knowing that they would create a buzz and thus increase the number of people who would read his work. Even the public way in which he lived his life was designed to draw attention to him. Kosinski loved the notion of stirring people up with his stories and ideas. He wished to be viewed as charming and charismatic. To be sure, Kosinski's writing tends to prompt a visceral response. It was for this reason—plus the ambiguity regarding his life—that creating a graduate analysis of his work was a tempting project. The question was where to begin such an undertaking. Kosinski was not one to tip his hand: everything that he said about his life was either misleading, deliberately contradictory or vague. For a long time, he would not even admit his Jewish heritage. (Sloan 1996, 167) Only his fiction itself, in the end, could stand alone, untainted by spin. For the purposes of this analysis, the details of each novel were not as important as the totality of the life story—of the Kosinskian man—that Kosinski was systematically creating with the publication of each new book.

What united all of Kosinski's work and how did it evolve over time? This was the question that most occupied my thoughts, with regard to Kosinski. The uniqueness of the Kosinskian man, and his presence, in one form or another in all but two of the novels, was the jumping off point of this work. Where this analysis differs from previous work is in its conceptual framework: the basic idea is that the novels constitute a life cycle, that together they make up the totality of a life. Just as each incident in *Steps* was really a

fragment of a single life, so Kosinski's novels—the argument goes—show the evolution of a protagonist, from a frightened young boy in the first novel to a confident adult fighting to stay in control in the next novels, to a small investor who is beginning to realize that control is an illusion, to a mature man physically in decline and losing confidence in himself, in the later novels.

Who is this Kosinskian man and why does the evolution of his character matter? And what does he represent? First and foremost, he is a victim, a man who has been made to suffer. His pain defines him. This has, in turn, caused his inability to feel and cut him off from those around him, resulting in an incapacity to relate to others. Unable to make sense of the events of his early life, and unwilling to play the victim, he henceforward attempts to dominate the lives of those around him. An appreciation of *Steps*, along these lines (e.g. as part of a progression), greatly enriches the meaning of *The Painted Bird* by showing the reader what happened to the boy after he grew to manhood. This is the rationale for studying these two seminal novels side by side and treating *The Painted Bird* as a guide to reading *Steps*.

While in *Steps* the need for control is substantial, *Cockpit's* Tarden, forever nourished by an underlying feeling of insecurity, takes the personal compulsion for control to an unprecedented new level. Tarden must control and manipulate others, rather than risk becoming their victim. He therefore strives hard to create a completely scripted reality, in which uncertainty has been eliminated. Tarden is the ultimate manipulator, a man whose games, false identities, masks and evasions make him the preeminent Kosinskian man. In *Blind Date*, by contrast, Levanter appears to be traveling down a new road, hoping to reintegrate into society and beginning to understand that control for its own sake is not a worthwhile goal. As characters, Tarden and Levanter start out from a similar place, but they choose to look at the world through profoundly different eyes.

The final three books, *Passion Play*, *Pinball* and *Hermit*, chart the decline of the Kosinskian man, possibly paralleling Kosinski's own middle life crisis or crises. Here my emphasis has been on unlocking the significance of *Hermit* and making sense of the formidably challenging style of writing, the 'autofiction,' employed by Kosinski in his last book. I have chosen to treat *Hermit*, the most hermetic of Kosinski's works, as a, possibly intended, guide to reading Kosinski.

Throughout this work, the emphasis has been on the significance and progress of the Kosinskian protagonist, from his genesis in *The Painted Bird* to his decline and death in *Hermit*. I trust that this approach has not only been helpful in clarifying Jerzy Kosinski's fiction, but that it may also prompt further discussion of the life and work of this enigmatic writer.

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